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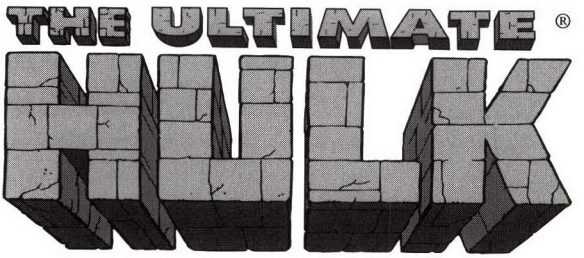
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Editors

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for

JACK KIRBY

and

BILL BIXBY

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INTRODUCTION

Stan Lee

Illustration by Grey

Let's face it—he isn't the handsomest dude in town, nor does he have the most ingratiating personality. He's certainly not the type of comic book star to drive females wild in his form-fitting spandex costume, and he'll never make a buck endorsing a hair tonic, lecturing at a charm school, or modeling for Calvin Klein.

If we agree on the above, then why is the incredible Hulk one of the world's most popular super heroes? (Unfortunately, though I'd love to hear your opinion, due to the somewhat one-sided relationship between reader and intro writer, I'm afraid you'll have to settle for just reading mine!)

I suspect one of the reasons for our green-skinned rampager's popularity stems from the fact that he's not your average do-gooder. It's safe to say there isn't another one like him; and, as you know, finding a unique hero among the multitudinous morass of today's cookie-cutter characters isn't easy to do. Sure, there are lots of broad-shouldered, trim-waisted, clean-cut heroes with finely chiseled features who wear colorful costumes that never get torn and have hairdos that never get mussed. Somehow the Hulk doesn't quite fit in that category.

Another element contributing to ol' Greenskin's popularity might be the fact that he's undergone so many changes over the years. Before we readers have a chance to get bored with him, a different writer and/or artist comes along with a different perspective, a different interpretation and every so often, a different skin color.

Even on his popular live-action television series there were changes a'plenty from the original comic book version. One really maniacal modification comes to mind: It was when the network's powers-that-be decided they didn't like the name Bruce Banner and insisted that he be called David Banner on TV! We had no choice but to go along with their decision, although I tried to ameliorate the situation by slyly adding the fact that his name was actually David Bruce Banner. Somehow they let us get away with that. Ah, the wit and wisdom of the TV networks!

But I know you're impatiently waiting for me to end my rambling peregrination and clue you in to the literary pleasures that await you on the pages ahead. Even though no mere words of mine can do justice to the plethora of passionate prose that follows, I'll attempt to give you a hint of the fun, excitement, and startling surprises we've cooked up for you. . . .

"Sidekick" is told from the point of view of Rick Jones, who first dared ally himself with the world's most dangerous human. Dennis Brabham gives us a totally different take on the life of the Hulk—a tale you're not likely to soon forget.

"In the Line of Banner." Danny Fingeroth allows us to meet the tormented father of Bruce Banner, the man whose uncontrollable rage and insane arrogance might have been responsible for the monster that eventually emerged.

"Transformations" is Will Murray's version of the Hulk's startling battle with Magneto, the most powerful mutant of all. And wait till you see what happens to the morphing flesh of poor Bruce Banner—and our gargantuan hero, as well.

In "Assault on Avengers Mansion," our hero turns into powerless Bruce Banner just when only the Hulk can save the Earth's mightiest heroes. Authors Richard C. White and Steven A. Roman did themselves proud on this one.

Pierce Askegren's "Pitfall" poses one of Bruce Banner's greatest problems. How can he morph into the Hulk in order to save Gamma Base without giving away his secret to the suspicious psychiatrist who is examining him?

"Out of the Darkness." What would you do if the man who once saved you now wants to kill you—especially if he has the power to turn you back into the monster you dread? Glenn Greenberg's tale is startling in its originality.

"Truck Stop." Picture this, if you will: A deadly gang terrorizing a small, Midwestern town—with Bruce Banner and the incredible Hulk working for opposite sides! As written by Jo Duffy, it'll keep you on the edge of your seat.

"Hiding" by Nancy Holder and Christopher Golden tackles a most unusual theme. When the Hulk's awesome power destroys an entire neighborhood, that senses-shattering deed gives a grieving female a second chance at life.

"Here There Be Dragons." How do you destroy the "Hellbeast" without killing the man within? Author Sholly Fisch better find the answer before the Hulk meets an unthinkable fate in a strange and savage sub-atomic world.

"A Quiet, Normal Life." Can this be the Bruce Banner we know? A happy suburbanite with a devoted wife and two lovely children? Thomas Deja doesn't let our hero's idyll last too long—not when the evil Nebulon attacks.

"A Green Snake in Paradise." Steve Lyons offers an epic tale involving the mysterious interdimensional Crossroads. And, as if that's not enough, the Hulk must actually battle himself.

"The Beast with Nine Bands." Not only is this title a doozy, but James A. Wolf gives you the gray Hulk joining a Texas sheriff in tracking down a gigantic monster that makes the Hulk himself look like a pussycat.

"Leveling Las Vegas." Imagine the gray-skinned Hulk acting as a protector for a Las Vegas mobster. Now imagine Stan Timmons tossing in the unstoppable Rhino for good measure. 'Nuff said.

In "The Samson Journals," Ken Grobe lets us witness a fantastic session in which the mysterious Dr. Samson seeks to integrate Bruce Banner's multiple personalities. Best of all, you needn't be a psychologist to enjoy it.

"Playing It SAFE." When Bruce Banner and his wife attempt to lead a normal life in New York, author Keith R.A. DeCandido attacks them with the Leader's deadly U-Foes—and imagine the pandemonium when SAFE charges in.

"The Last Titan." Will Bruce Banner succeed in destroying the last man on Earth? Who is that man? Why does Banner want to kill him? How did it all happen? Don't miss Peter David's engrossing yarn on the pages ahead.

* * *

I hope those little literary tidbits have whet your Hulkish appetite. I envy you the thrills that lie ahead. Don't waste another minute—I'll be with you in spirit, reading over your shoulder.

Excelsior!

Stan Lee

RETRODUCTION

Peter David

Illustration by David Brewer and Andrew Pepoy

People change.

People stay the same.

These are statements that appear, on the surface, to be mutually contradictory, but really they're complementary. Take the Hulk as a case in point.

Arguably the Hulk has gone through more changes and morphs of both character and personality than any other Marvel hero. Perhaps more than any comic book hero, period. The stories that you are about to read present an admirable overview of the many incarnations, personas, and mindsets that the jade giant has undergone throughout his long and occasionally checkered publishing history. We've seen a dazzling variety of aspects and circumstances which have shaped his personality: From his abusive father (thereby dooming Bruce Banner to a life of hardship even before he was born) to his time as an Avengers team member . . . through his days of savagery and eventual cogency, to his possible final days as a symbol of man's folly in the opening of a scientific Pandora's box which would have been better left closed. We've seen the Hulk articulate, crafty, naïve, innocent, scheming, confident, and afraid. He's fit into a variety of venues, be it the hardcore super heroing in "Assault on Avengers Mansion," the television-series-esque "Out of the Darkness," or the *Yojimbo* flavor of "Truck Stop." It speaks to the malleability of the Hulk's very essence that he can adapt to so many different viewpoints and such varied environs, and still be recognizably the Hulk. The transformations may give Bruce Banner pain and the Hulk aggravation, but ultimately change is part and parcel of the Hulk's fictional life.

But as much as the Hulk has changed, he has also stayed the same, and that consistency has been his greatest strength. No matter what his incarnation, the Hulk remains the perpetual outsider, trying to come to grips with a world that will not accept him on his own terms, but can't even begin to define the circumstances under which he would be embraced.

And his greatest struggles continue to come from within rather than without. No matter what, he remains a being who battles his own

inner demons, whether those demons are called Bruce Banner, the Hulk, Mr. Fixit, or the Maestro.

Exploring those struggles has been my job for the last decade or so. It's been my honor every month to present the Hulk with new challenges to overcome, and to explore the depths of his very psyche. It has been one hell of a ride. You might wonder how complicated one person can be, anyway. How much story material can be derived from the psychological odyssey of one man? The answer to that, obviously, is quite a lot when the man is Bruce Banner.

I admit, I've been in control to some extent along the way. When I first embarked on the assignment, it was always my intention to wind up combining the different personas of the Hulk into a ''new and improved'' version. It took me four years, and there were certainly some permutations along the way, but basically I accomplished that. However, it was a long strange trip to that goal, and since then the exploration of what's going on in that green skull of his has become increasingly complex and challenging.

People wonder how I keep ''coming up'' with new situations for the Hulk and his assorted incarnations. Oftentimes I feel that it's not even up to me, and that's the aspect of my job where I'm not in control. The Hulk's reactions to what has gone before serve to dictate what's going to happen next. It's hardly a perfect formula, but it's one that has served me well for the one hundred-plus issues of my involvement with the character.

The ironic thing is that he's become far more than a character to me. Indeed, we've come to share a very real situation, we two. No matter what, the Hulk continues to live in Bruce Banner's head every day. As it so happens, he lives within mine as well. Sometimes I find myself viewing the world through his eyes, becoming impatient or frustrated, or feeling my ''darker urgings'' rooting around and perhaps even threatening to take on their own form. Hasn't quite happened, don't worry. I'm not in danger of ''hulking out'' anytime soon. But it's a situation that many people can relate to, I think, and that—more than anything—has given the Hulk his core appeal throughout the years.

The adventures of virtually every other super heroic character describe what it's like accomplishing great deeds because of the gifts that the characters have received. The story of the Hulk, however, has been

the chronicle of what it's like to try and succeed, to survive, and to "do the right thing" in spite of those "gifts." Not only is the Hulk's unique situation a curse rather than a blessing, but he must perpetually struggle with his darker and more foreboding impulses. He has to wrestle with selfishness, with anger and impatience, with frustration and fury. In this day and age, we've come to realize that power remains the ultimate double-edged sword. Those who wield it must constantly deal with the base impulse to use it in improper ways, ranging from utilizing military force to subdue a population to using the power of one's office and one's personal charisma for the purpose of obtaining favors.

More than any other character, the Hulk's struggles are real. Not a lot of us have dealt with trying to outthink and outmaneuver a scheming villain endeavoring to conquer the world, but every single one of us has had to overcome darker and selfish impulses for the purpose of trying to "do the right thing," whatever that may be in the given moment. That, above all else, has made the Hulk and Bruce Banner someone with whom we can identify. Someone who holds up a dark mirror to us and either gives us something to aspire to or something to shrink from, depending upon how he happens to be handling his own personal crises that month.

That's what gave the television incarnation such resonance with viewers (how many of us haven't wanted to kick over a car when struggling with a flat tire, or destroy a pay phone when dealing with a brain-dead operator?). That's why the Hulk managed to overcome the death sentence of early comic book cancellation to return, angrier and more determined than ever, first in the pages of *The Avengers* and *Fantastic Four* and then in his own series again. More so than any other character (with the possible exception of everyman Peter Parker, the amazing Spider-Man), when we look at the Hulk, we look at ourselves. His struggles become ours, his frustrations easily identifiable, his triumphs something to try and emulate, and his failures something to avoid.

He rattles around in my head all the time. It becomes somewhat frightening sometimes, because his voice is so clear to me. And because he's resided there for so long, it becomes extremely intimidating to me because—if I get upset or angry—I can fancy that I hear his voice roaring every now and then. It's daunting, and part of me almost

wishes that I could just toss aside the book at this point, thereby ridding myself of that extra passenger in my head. But I feel a sort of kinship, even loyalty to him now. As much as he snarls and snaps in there, I know he'd be hurt if I walked away from him, if I rejected him. So many others have already done so, after all. He has been abandoned and betrayed by those he considered friends, allies or loved ones, used, abused and tossed aside. I can relate to that. (Who couldn't?) And I don't want to be another one of those who abandon him, not when I still think I can help him or serve a purpose by continuing to be his chronicler. I owe him that much, because telling his story has gotten me a good deal of notoriety and attention. I don't want to be just another user, and I don't want to desert him. It doesn't seem right or fair somehow. The Hulk and I, we're in this one together, in for the long haul.

Sooner or later it will be good-bye, I suppose. Whether it will be by mutual agreement, or circumstances beyond my control, I couldn't say. I don't look forward to that time, though, I can tell you. Because as scary as it is having him residing in my head, and intimidating as it is tapping into that darker side of me every month for the purpose of seeing what he's up to, the Hulk has provided a strange constancy to my life. Most everything that's gone on with me over the past decade has found its way into the book, filtered through the fictional doings and unique perceptions of its lead character. The Hulk's voice and my own have merged and blurred so as to be almost indistinguishable sometimes. I try to provide the conscience for his world, and he is the cynical commentator on my own. It is a curious and uneasy alliance, one that I never expected to form.

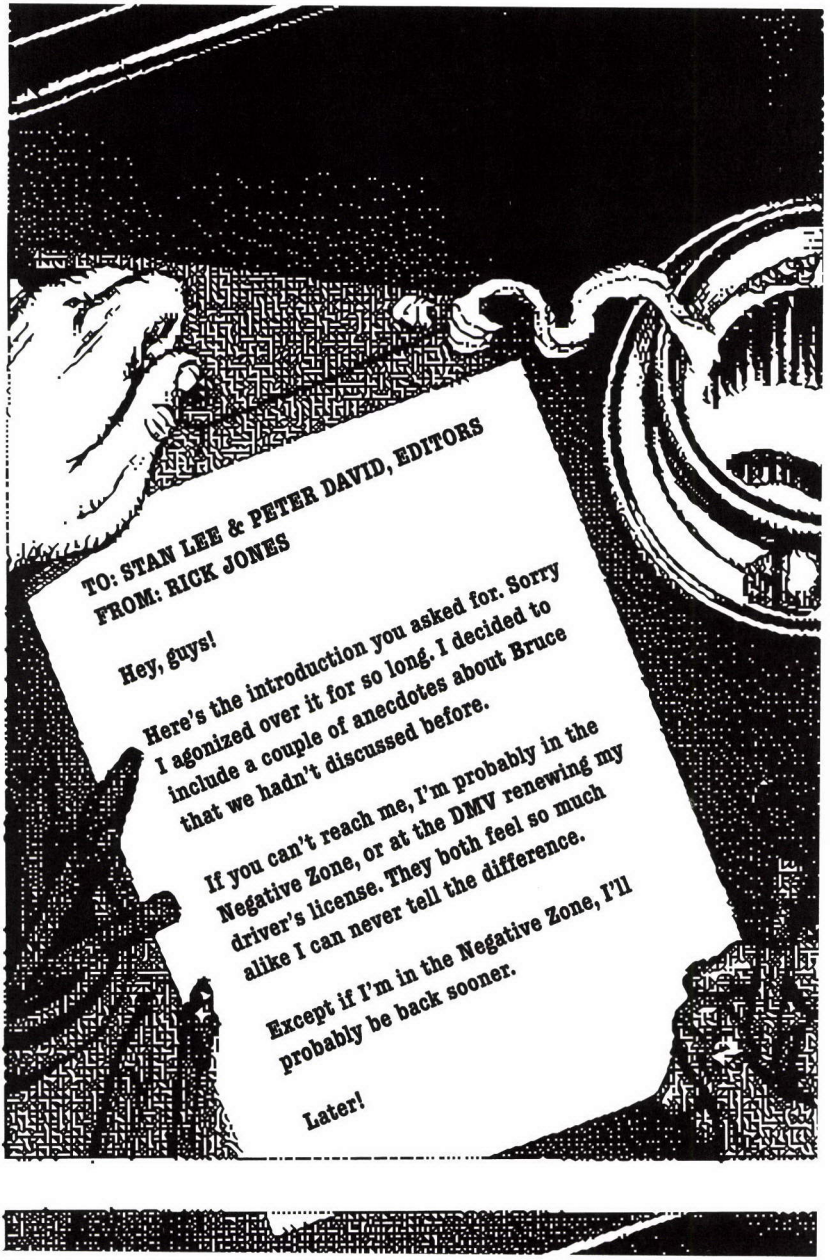
He has remained a constant in my life. He is something that has remained the same. He has also changed a great deal. The same old conflict.

You'd think I'd be used to it by now.

Note: As *The Ultimate Hulk* went to press, Peter David did, in fact, decide to end his tenure as the writer of the monthly *Incredible Hulk* comic book, concluding an impressive twelve years on the title. This anthology serves as a coda to a run that has included over one hundred monthly comics, several annuals and special editions, one novel, and an Eisner Award.

The Hulk, meanwhile, continues onward . . .

SIDEKICK



Dennis Brabham

Illustration by John Pierard

A lot of people have asked me why I agreed to write an introduction to this book. After all, I've met all kinds of super heroes over the years—even been a partner for some of them—and I've never introduced any of those "tell-all" books they've had published.

It has nothing to do with any of that, really. None of that is any more important than what anyone else does during the course of their day. I mean, you can either be in the middle of a Kree/Skrull war fighting for your life, or you can be one of the people waiting to see what's going to happen, wondering if there's going to be a world tomorrow. Either one is a terrifying human experience.

I've got no powers and I don't really have anything exceptional to tell you about super heroes, simply because the ones I know, the ones I *really* know, are human beings to me.

A while back I lost a good friend named Mar-Vell to cancer. I won't bother you here with the details of how it happened, but I will say that his death tore a hole in my heart. When you've been around super-powered beings as long as I have, you often forget that someone capable of beating down world-destroyers like Thanos or Galactus can be as frail—as *human*—as you or me. But at least Mar-Vell died a hero, with people honoring his name.

I have another friend, just as honest, just as noble, who people don't look upon as a hero. This book is for him.

His name is Robert Bruce Banner.

The incredible Hulk.

My best friend.

I hope you get an idea of just the kind of man he was after you've read this book. The only problem with books is they've got to follow some sort of narrative, a story structure. Life with the Hulk never really has that—it doesn't follow a natural progression. It's a full-tilt roller coaster ride with no brakes. There are some things I had to leave out of *Sidekick*, my bestselling autobiography (now there's an unabashed plug!), because they didn't fit into the sort of smooth storytelling book editors want.

Here in the introduction, though, I can say anything I want, including something I had originally planned to leave out; I thought maybe Bruce wouldn't want people to see that side of him. But now that I think about it, it's just the kind of thing that everybody should—no, *needs* to know.

The human part.

First off, I want everyone to know that I didn't work on this book out of guilt. Most people probably know the story by now—about how I was the stupid jerk who, on a dare, sneaked onto a nuclear bomb test site.

Good thing we didn't have really tall buildings or bridges in the Southwest to jump off of, huh?

Maybe I was being stupid; more likely I just didn't care too much about what happened to me. I'd been in an orphanage most of my life, and I found the best way to get in good with a new group of kids was to be the most daring among them. I figured the worst that could happen to me by sneaking onto a military base was a trip to juvenile hall. It would probably have better food than the flophouse I was staying in.

I didn't take into consideration what would happen if the scientists running the site didn't stop the countdown of the gamma bomb they were testing. At sixteen, you just don't figure on those kind of things happening—you're immortal, you can get into any kind of trouble and just walk away. Of course for most kids, that usually means shoplifting candy from the corner store or sneaking out of your parents' house without permission, not squeezing your way into the middle of an atom-splitting session.

That's how I met Bruce Banner, as he came racing across the desert in a jeep. It wasn't a "Hi, how are you?" kind of thing, it was more of a "You young idiot, there's a bomb here! Leave before you're killed!" sort of meeting.

It's true what people say about first impressions being the most important. He certainly got my attention.

He was pretty strong for such a thin, bookwormish guy. He pulled me from my jalopy and started dragging me toward a trench, then froze as, in the distance, a voice broadcast over a loudspeaker system

counted down the seconds to detonation. Later, I'd find out that Bruce had told his assistant to stop the countdown—but that's another story.

Then, events seemed to pass slowly, like in a dream.

Okay, more like in a nightmare.

I remember Bruce throwing me over the lip of the trench; I landed on my back. The impact knocked the wind out of me.

Then there was noise—a blast of sound like the archangel Gabriel blowing his horn to knock down the walls of Jericho. (Boy, the stuff they drummed into my head back at the orphanage.) The sun, the sky—all of it turned the brightest shade of green.

And in the middle of it all was poor Bruce. The radiation and concussive force at his back must have grabbed him like a giant fist, and he was just taking it in, soaking it up, like a surfer caught in a high wave, waiting for the crest to pass and drop him. I was thinking, "This guy is gonna die, and it's my fault!" After all, even though the gamma bomb was designed to just destroy inanimate objects (as I found out later), getting caught near ground zero of a nuclear explosion reminds you it's still a really big *bomb*.

I remember Bruce later telling me that he wasn't sure just how powerful the explosion was going to be—that's what the test was for. So he had several seconds to wonder if the force of the bomb was going to sear off his flesh, cause his blood to crystallize, or liquefy his intestines. He said, "Giving a nuclear physicist ten seconds to viscerally contemplate his death from an atomic warhead explosion is a torturous eternity I wouldn't wish on anyone."

Yeah, that was Bruce, all right. Couldn't use one-syllable words when he could use words with five.

Eventually, military guys in radiation suits came out to pick us up. They were amazed to find the two of us still alive; so was I. They took us to the base headquarters and locked us away in a special radiation decontamination cell. Being locked up wasn't a problem for me—I'd been in and out of so many jail cells by then that prison food was starting to look like home cooking. No, getting incarcerated didn't bother me at all.

But the screaming . . .

Bruce had started screaming during the explosion, and it went on

for hours. I didn't know a human being could scream that loud and that long and still be alive when his torment finally ended.

When Bruce finally calmed down, I sat for an hour trying to figure out how to apologize to him about the whole thing, and was having trouble finding the words. (How do you apologize for putting someone in the middle of a nuclear bomb blast, anyway?)

Bruce just turned to me and said, "Rick, let me ask you a question. A hundred military guards didn't stop you from sneaking onto the test site. My assistant didn't stop the countdown—only God knows why. And *I'm* a certified genius who didn't think to jump into the trench at the same time I pushed you in. To be entirely honest, son, I know you feel horrible, but do you *really* think we can place all the blame for this on you?"

And then he smiled.

Can you believe it? I put the guy through hell and he says, "Hey, not your fault." And he was being sincere about it.

I knew right then there was something amazing about this guy. I'd been in orphanages where most adults would give you a smack for looking at them cross-eyed. *This* guy takes a gamma bomb blast to save my hide and doesn't hold me responsible.

I figured this guy must be living some charmed life, some super-lucky guy who everything went right for. Or maybe it was just his outlook on life. Whatever it was, it was a lot more than I'd ever gotten from someone else in my life. Real heartfelt compassion from this stranger, even after I nearly destroyed his life. That right there tells you everything you need to know about Bruce Banner the man.

Everything you need to know about Bruce Banner the human being happened that same day.

We'd been in the decontamination cell for a while. A couple of doctors had checked us out and couldn't find anything wrong with us—which was kind of nuts, considering the amount of radiation Bruce had absorbed. One of the doctors left a Geiger counter in the room, and it clicked once or twice. (Dope that I was, I thought it was a radio.)

Bruce was starting to get frantic. "They must be waiting for me to

die! It isn't possible to take so much gamma radiation, and not have *something* happen!''

Then sunset came, and the Geiger counter started clicking like mad.

Bruce's face took on the appearance of an angry, gray, summer storm cloud. You know the type of cloud I'm talking about—the one that comes from nowhere on an August day and simmers for a little while until it lets loose with a sudden, blinding, furious torrent. Not the kind of thing you want to get caught by in the open.

Then he started having these seizures. I swear every time he took a deep breath, his body expanded like a balloon. It kept on expanding until he'd ripped right through his clothes.

He wasn't the same man when the change ended. Anger was carved on his face, jutting and heavy in his eyebrows and cheeks, hiding all the compassion I'd seen earlier. Suddenly, he'd become taller, with tough gray skin, and muscles. Plenty of muscles.

The Hulk was born.

But, even with the change, there was something familiar about the way he looked. Something in his eyes . . .

''Get out of my way, insect!'' the Hulk roared at me. I guess I didn't move fast enough, because he swatted me to the side with the back of his hand.

It was turning out to be a day for first impressions. This one, though, was all bad.

I would've run right then, except the decontamination room was locked from the outside. It didn't matter, though. Bruce soon made his own door.

By tearing out a wall. With his bare hands.

Before he could get very far, though, a group of soldiers saw him and just started firing wildly. The only safe place was standing behind this big gray . . . *thing* Bruce had become. Then one of the soldiers called him a ''hulk'' and I guess it stuck, because that's what Bruce later started calling himself.

Anyway, I was frozen in place, unable to go anyplace else. I'd already tried my luck earlier playing tag with a G-bomb, and I was in no mood to press the point by dodging howitzer shells. Bruce—or

Hulk—at this point was taking them right on the chin, and even *he* had to cover up a little. Then I heard him.

"Why don't they just leave me alone?" he said at first softly, so I almost didn't hear him. Then it came out like a mantra, growing louder each time he said it, and it seemed like there was no other sound in the world, except him yelling, getting madder and more out of control.

He didn't stop yelling and swinging and smashing until every soldier was down, every jeep totaled, every piece of heavy artillery crushed and twisted. It was like Bruce had taken the power of the gamma bomb that hit him and returned it with interest. I found myself looking at him, staring at his face, trying to figure out why he looked so familiar even with his face distorted like that.

And then it hit me.

A little bit of backstory here. I don't know my parents and don't have a clue as to who they were. I can only remember being in orphanages my entire life. Maybe it allowed me some leeway, mentally. I could think that my parents really loved me, and that they were taken from me before they could let me know that, or maybe someday they'd come back for me and everything would be normal. It wasn't a parade of sunshine for Little Orphan Ricky, but at least there was something for me to believe in, a little bit of hope.

But there were some kids—kids who'd been battered and abandoned, told they were worthless and useless, that their parents didn't want them. Those kids would take a couple of shots from the caretakers or maybe they'd be told they were garbage, and some of them would get that look on their faces: The anger. The clenched fists. Their bodies shaking until you thought they were going to explode. Even the way they would talk about themselves in the third person, like whatever happened was happening to someone else. And the way sometimes they would go crazy, just trying to smash everything in sight.

That's what I saw in the Hulk's eyes. Something inside Bruce Banner was just like every kid I'd seen in the orphanage at that time. Somehow, I knew he'd been abused as a child—beaten, cursed, and

belittled. But I guess it wasn't Bruce's nature to show the anger created by that abuse, so he repressed it—held it in until a hate-filled beast was living inside him, waiting to be unleashed on the world.

And the gamma bomb had done just that.

I guess there's a lot of truth to that old saying about being careful around "the quiet ones." About how they usually turn out to be the type who climb up on clock towers and shoot at innocent bystanders with high-powered rifles.

Only in Bruce's case, his rifle was a one-ton, gray-skinned engine of destruction.

Anyway, back to the army base . . .

The Hulk turned away and was leaving the base, until I yelled out to him. I still remember what I said:

"You need me now!"

It was what I used to do with the other kids in the orphanage. I'd tell them we needed each other, otherwise they would become brooding, angry replicas of whatever was hurting them (guards and such), and take it out on the other kids.

The Bruce Banner I'd met a few hours earlier didn't need to become that. He'd forgiven me for changing his life earlier, and showed me he was a decent guy. Probably the only one I'd met at that point in my life. I owed him for that more than anything in the world. I didn't care if he took a swat at me again with one of those big mitts that I'd seen destroy a tank earlier. I owed him. He needed somebody he could trust.

I told him, "You saved my life! You need me now. I'm goin' with you!"

He looked at me, just stared at me for a minute trying to decide. Then the Hulk headed off into the desert, with me trailing along close behind.

Our relationship became a bit closer after that.

Back then, the rising sun would change the Hulk back to Bruce Banner, and during the day I'd learn how, even with his tortured soul, Bruce still knew more about being a man than a dozen other guys.

And when he was the Hulk, I learned how to be a friend through just about anything. He was like a father and brother, a best friend who could be your rock, and then just as suddenly need you for a tether to reality.

I've been a sidekick to many heroes. Heck, I know all the Avengers, I've fought in space a hundred times, met more aliens than you can shake an X-file at, and seen things I'll never be able to share with the rest of the world.

But Bruce Banner gave me more than all of that combined. He gave me the one thing most people have and don't even consider amazing.

He gave me a family.

Now, there was somebody to care about, and somebody who cared about me. Something I'd never had before.

Don't ever envy the guys who get to fly or bend steel, because I've met a lot of them, and most of them would trade everything they've got just to have someone to talk to—someone who could listen to their troubles and understand. Bruce Banner has given me the world as only my best friend could. And even though I didn't write this book, I'm still dedicating it to him.

When you think about the Hulk, remember Bruce Banner, and that for all that's happened to him, he's always tried to do the right thing.

Think of him as a hero.

IN THE LINE OF BANNER

Danny Fingeroth

Illustration by Jamal Y. Igle and Andrew Pepoy

Before there was an incredible Hulk, before there was even a Bruce Banner, there was another man who wrestled with a beast that lived inside him. A man haunted by memories of his own tortured childhood. A man who would come to hate his offspring as his own father had hated him.

His name was Brian.

Father to Bruce Banner.

Father to the monster. . . .

". . . and if it's a boy, we'll call him Bruce."

"Of course, Rebecca. Of course."

Why did she have to bring up that topic again*?* wondered Brian Banner, focusing his gaze on his glass of beaujolais nouveau. They had barely been married a year, and all she seemed to talk about was when they would have a child. They'd hardly even had a chance to get to know each other. There was so much he didn't know about her . . . and so much he kept secret *from* her.

Such as how his own father had so often punished him. Tried to make him feel as if he didn't exist. Brian swore to himself long ago that he would never sire a child of his own, never run the risk that he would do to a child what had been done to him. There had been a monster living inside his father right up to the day he died, and it was Brian and his mother who suffered at its hands. Brian feared that he had inherited the monster. He never would want to do to a wife or child what he had been witness to—and victim of—himself. The Banner line would end with him.

But, Brian had to admit, little by little, his wife was chipping away at his determination. Perhaps Rebecca, with her sparkling eyes and carefree laugh, would be able to help him transcend his dark past. Their courtship, their marriage had been so . . . well, so much fun. So unlike his parents' marriage. Perhaps having a child wouldn't be that bad.

I owe it to the gene pool, Brian often mused, only half-jokingly. *But . . . not now, not so soon.*

For now, Brian had other things to concern him. The youngest Ph.D. ever to graduate from his alma mater, he had a scientific career ahead of him that knew no limits. Suave and earnestly sophisticated, his biggest problem was deciding which job offer to accept. NASA, IBM, CIA, UCLA. There were so many organizations. If they had initials, they wanted Brian Banner. All he had to do was choose.

Yes, let him mold the career, then the children and family and all the rest would fall into place.

Brian refilled their wine glasses. "A toast, my dear. To our future."

"To the *three* of us," Rebecca said, and smiled.

Brian's lips formed a thin, hard line. Silently, he drained his glass.

A week passed. Brian had narrowed the job offers to three, but never got the chance to make the final decision. Fate took that choice away from him.

Fate in the person of M. Hardy Burlingame.

Even the usually unflappable Brian was shocked by Burlingame's unannounced appearance at his laboratory door. Known for his penchant for the unexpected, Burlingame was the world's foremost authority on radiation. No university could claim it had an interest in the sciences if it hadn't given an honorary doctorate to Burlingame. He was one of the few men alive Brian looked up to, and here he was, on a crystal clear winter day, on Brian's doorstep.

"Dr. Banner, I presume?" the white-haired, well-tanned professor asked.

"Dr. Burlingame? I—what—that is . . ." Brian stammered. He had met the scientist a year before at a conference in Geneva, Switzerland, and Brian had been no more articulate.

"I know you're a busy man, Dr. Banner," Burlingame said, "so I'll get to the point of my visit. I have been tasked by our government with heading up a team of our most gifted scientists in what could be the noblest endeavor of our times: the quest for a source of clean nuclear radiation. Something with all the potential benefits of atomic or gamma radiation . . . but without the destructive side effects, without the poisonous contaminating factors that last for tens of thousands of years."

Burlingame smiled. "I have to admit, when I was first approached with this project, I was dumbfounded. How someone actually managed to get legislation passed that would fund this sort of thing is beyond my understanding. But before they come to their senses, I want to get this project going. With your knowledge added to that of the other team members I've assembled, I know we'll be able to achieve our goal."

Brian stood there, mouth agape. He tried to collect his thoughts, to come up with a way to agree to Burlingame's offer—there could certainly be no doubt that he would—that would read best in his memoirs.

"I must caution you on one point, Dr. Banner—" Burlingame continued.

"Please, call me Brian," the young man said, happy to have at last been able to form a complete sentence in the great man's presence.

Burlingame nodded. "Brian, then. As you, of course, know, there are dangers involved when working with nuclear energy—the very dangers we are working to counteract. Above and beyond the chance we may blow ourselves up—" and here Burlingame chuckled like a walrus "—there are the known and unknown side effects linked to the radiation. We suspect possible birth defects, mutant variations, who knows what else. Of course, we'll take all possible precautions to make sure that no one working there becomes exposed, but nothing in life is a hundred percent certain. You're a young man, Brian. You and your wife may want to have children, and I can't guarantee. . . ."

Burlingame's voice trailed off. He didn't need to say any more; the dangers of the assignment were obvious.

After a few moments of quiet contemplation, Brian looked up at his idol.

"I appreciate your concern, Dr. Burlingame." Brian paused a second, waiting to be invited to address the scientist by his first name, but the old man remained silent. Brian continued: "But, as you said, I'm well aware of the risks. I'll just have to be extra careful around the radioactive materials. I'm sure we'll be able to handle that."

Brian took two glasses and a bottle of rye whiskey out of the ma-

hogany cabinet behind his desk. He filled the tumblers and handed one to Burlingame. "A toast, Doctor."

One of Burlingame's bushy eyebrows rose in a quizzical fashion as he took the offered glass. "A little early in the day, isn't it, Brian?"

"A very special occasion, Doctor. I'm accepting your offer."

"Don't you want to check with your wife?"

Brian shook his head. "I know her well, sir. She'll be as thrilled as I am."

Burlingame smiled. "Then it *is* a special occasion. Welcome aboard, Brian."

"Glad to *be* aboard, sir."

They clinked glasses. Burlingame took a polite sip and placed his glass on the desk. Brian drank deeply.

Burlingame handed Brian a business card. "Here's my office's number. You can get the details from my attaché. We'll expect you in New Mexico two weeks from today."

"Fine. I'll see you there, sir," Brian said. Burlingame nodded and departed.

Spying the drink left by Burlingame, Brian drained the tumbler in another celebratory toast. He smiled contentedly as the alcohol burned softly in his stomach.

It truly was a great day.

Rebecca didn't see it quite that way.

"You agreed to take a job halfway across the country and you didn't ask me how I felt about it?" Arms folded across her chest, she turned her back to her husband.

"I . . . I'm sorry, Rebecca. But it was the offer of a lifetime from the most revered scientist in the world! I knew you'd want me to take it." Brian paused. "Are you really angry?"

Her shoulders sagged. "Yes, Bri . . . but I'll get over it." Rebecca turned back to face him. "Promise me we'll have a nice house there with a big, airy room for . . . Bruce."

The baby. Again.

Brian closed his eyes, fighting to douse the fire that burned in his gut. He counted to ten. Then to twenty.

"A very big, very airy room, Rebecca," he finally said.

"Anything else I should know about the situation?" Rebecca asked.

Brian shook his head. "Nothing at all. Just bring plenty of sunscreen."

The sunlight that blazed down on the New Mexico desert seemed bright and clean and pure. More than ever, Brian was sure he had made the right decision. As they sat on the porch of their spare but spacious home on the campus of Project: Clean Bill, Brian and Rebecca enjoyed a late brunch on the last Sunday before Brian was to plunge into his work. It was a pleasant enough day that Brian could almost forget about the barbed-wire fences surrounding the base and the ubiquitous Military Police guarding it.

Brian glanced at Rebecca. From the small frown that tugged at the corners of her mouth, it was clear that she wasn't pleased with the situation.

"It'll get better, Becca," he said. "I promise."

Smiling, Rebecca eased her shoe off and edged her toe up Brian's calf. He playfully pushed her foot away. She moved it back. This time he didn't rebuff her. Their hands met and he pulled her to him.

Maybe things will work out after all, Brian thought.

"No! No! No! No! No!"

"What'd I do, Banner?" asked Brad McCallum, one of the members of Brian's team. His hand was on the fly-wheel that opened the door to the main laboratory.

"What'd you do? You almost went into the lab without your protective suit, McCallum!"

McCallum stared at Brian as though he had three heads. "So what? The meters all read that it's safe in there."

"The meters haven't worked correctly since Day One," Brian countered. "I never go in there without my suit."

"Loosen up, Brian," McCallum said. "We're using state-of-the-art equipment here—the best that Uncle Sam can buy. Every possible precaution has been taken. At the slightest sign of a radiation leak,

the automated systems will seal this place tight as a drum.'' He gestured toward the other scientists—Harold Chin, Walter Jefferson, and Artie Levine—who stood watching this exchange. ''You don't see any of the other guys getting so nervous about things either, do you?''

Brian huffed. ''I don't foresee them living much past forty, either. Where radiation's concerned, I take no chances. We're supposed to be the world's foremost authorities on the subject, but not even *we* know for sure how prolonged exposure will affect us. That's why we're working on developing *clean* energy, remember?''

''Okay, Banner, okay,'' said McCallum, hands held up in surrender. ''You win.''

Brian turned his back to his co-workers and began putting on his protective suit.

Bunch of short-sighted fools, he thought. *Who knows what the levels of radiation in this place could do to us . . . or children. . . .*

''Auntie 'Becca! Buy me this dolly! Please!''

Rebecca Banner sheepishly looked down at Gloria Chin, six-year-old daughter of project scientist Harold Chin and his wife, Wanda.

The scientists' wives and children were on a Military Police-chaperoned shopping trip—a welcomed chance to get away from the high-security base. Standing in the toy aisle of Walbert's Department Store, Rebecca smiled at the child, wondering if she was supposed to say ''yes.''

''Now, Gloria,'' said Wanda, rushing over to dig Rebecca out of the situation, ''it isn't nice to bother Aunt Rebecca. If she buys *you* a toy, she'll have to buy toys for *all* the kids. That wouldn't be fair to her, now, would it?''

''But I love that dolly!'' Gloria insisted. ''And all the daddies are making a lot of money here—you told me so!''

Wanda's face reddened noticeably. ''Um . . . actually, Gloria, that's not anyone's business but each family's, and Brian isn't a daddy. The Banners don't have any children yet, so they might have a whole other way of looking at things.''

Wanda looked at Rebecca, saw how close she was to tears, and blushed even more. Rebecca broke away from the raven-haired mother

and daughter and ran into the next aisle. But there was no refuge there, as Rebecca, blinded by tears, ran smack into the other project wives.

"Are you all right, dear?" asked Anne, genuinely concerned.

"Y-yes," stammered Rebecca. "Must be the desert heat. I'm just so emotional lately."

"Of course, of course," whispered Anne, putting an arm around the woman who had become her friend. "It's time we were getting back, anyway."

"Is Auntie 'Becca okay?" Gloria Chin asked in a loud voice.

"I'm fine, dear. Just fine," said Rebecca. She flashed an uneasy smile that seemed to reassure the child.

Excusing herself, Rebecca turned and moved quickly toward the front doors of the store. She needed to get out, get away from the mothers and children and constant reminders that—at least in her mind—her life was incomplete.

She needed to talk to Brian.

"Not again, Rebecca!" Brian roared. "Not now! This isn't the time! There's important work we're doing, and now is not the time to contemplate having a child. How many times do we have to have this discussion?"

It was a rare dinner at home for Brian and Rebecca. Brian had only come home because some of the equipment had overheated and the lab had to be shut down while technicians looked it over.

"But, Brian, all the other scientists have children and they seem to do their jobs at least as well as you—"

"What did you say?" Brian said softly, the words coming out more like a growl.

Rebecca's eyes widened, and she took a step back from her husband.

"I—that came out wrong," she said hastily. "I'm just saying, life always presents people with challenges and reasons *not* to do things. But if you have a little hope and faith, then things tend to work out."

Brian shook his head. "I can't deal with this, Rebecca. Not tonight. We'll have children one day, once we help to make it a world where

we'd *want* to raise a child. And this project can do that. But let us *finish* it first.''

''There'll always be some project or other getting in the way, won't there, Brian?'' Rebecca said glumly. ''But all right, we've exhausted the topic for tonight.''

But there's always tomorrow night, thought Brian, grimacing.

He poured himself another glass of wine.

''We're going to be booted off of the project for this. . . .'' Brian cautioned.

''Oh, don't be so uptight, Banner,'' said Artie Levine, the moon silhouetting his Elvis-style hair. ''Who are they going to get to replace us—the Three Stooges?''

The Project: Clean Bill team squeezed under the gap between the chain-link fence and the desert sand. Brian's jacket sleeve tore on a piece of wire as he slid through. He cursed himself for agreeing to sneak off base with the others, but Rebecca had said he should go, try to bond with his teammates. He wondered if, secretly, she was hoping their love of fatherhood would rub off on him.

With McCallum leading the way, they dodged around the security searchlights and sprinted the hundred yards to the Rusty Nail.

''Old Man Burlingame'd bust a gut if he saw us now,'' whispered Chin.

The team entered the saloon.

Ninety minutes and many drinks later, the sextet had touched on most of the topics of the day and of their work. The alcohol had soaked their advanced brains to the point where the conversation turned toward personal matters.

''I say, the odd thwack on the behind will do more to keep a kid in line than all the lectures in the world,'' McCallum remarked. ''And if he still doesn't change—*more* thwacks. *Harder* thwacks. Until he gets the message.'' Beside him, Walter Jefferson nodded in apparent agreement, though whether he was really listening to McCallum's speech was debatable.

But Brian Banner was listening, his fists clenching tighter with

every word of McCallum's. "Exactly wrong," Brian muttered, to himself he thought. But apparently not.

"You got something to say, Banner, say it to my face," boomed McCallum.

Brian twisted uneasily in his chair. "I said, if that's the way you think children should be treated, you don't deserve to *have* any."

"You've got a hell of a nerve saying that to me, Banner," McCallum shot back. "You, of all people." He pointed an accusatory finger at Brian. "You don't even have what it takes to have a kid. One look at your wife's face could tell you that."

Banner jumped to his feet, no longer able—no longer wanting—to control his anger. Hands clenched into fists, lips curled back to expose his teeth in a feral snarl, he growled softly. Rational thought was lost in the red haze that settled over his mind. Brian took a step toward McCallum, imagining his hands closing around the man's throat—

—only to be snapped back to reality by the powerful grip of a hand on his shoulder.

Brian turned to face the Military Policeman who had grabbed him.

"Okay, boys," said the burly MP, "playtime's over. Dr. Burlingame wants everybody back in their cribs now."

The anger drained from Brian's body, washing away the haze that had clouded his thoughts. He shuddered from the realization of what he had been about to do, and gripped the edge of a table to steady himself.

"Let's go, Doc," the MP said. He tightened his grip on Brian's shoulder.

Brian nodded and fell in line behind his co-workers, ignoring McCallum's heated gaze.

Like a band of sheepish schoolboys caught peeping into the girls' locker room, the world's top nuclear physicists shuffled meekly out of the Rusty Nail and back toward the base, a dozen MPs making sure none of them wandered off.

Trailing the group, away from the guilty camaraderie of the rest, Brian Banner walked alone. He had seen the monster tonight. Part of him had *liked* seeing the monster. Both these facts terrified him. He

would *not* become his father. No matter what it took, what it cost. He owed it to himself. He owed it to Rebecca.

For as long as I'm here, Brian vowed, *I will concentrate only on my work. No socializing with these fools. Look where it almost led . . . what it almost released. I'll finish my work here and use that accomplishment to catapult us someplace where we can be safe and happy . . . and far away from monsters. . . .*

The next morning, there was a knock on Brian's office door. It was, of all people, McCallum.

"Sorry, Brian," McCallum said apologetically. "I should never let myself drink as much as I did last night. I said some things that were way out of line."

"Anything else?"

McCallum started, apparently surprised by Brian's brusque response. "Uh . . . no."

"Then I've got work to do."

Brian slammed the door, shutting out the stunned expression on McCallum's face.

As Brian turned from the door, his phone rang.

Another interruption, he thought angrily. *How am I supposed to get the job done if I keep getting interrupted?* He snatched up the receiver.

"Yes," he snapped into the mouthpiece.

"Brian, it's Rebecca."

"Yes."

"I was speaking with Mrs. McCallum. She said Bill felt awful about last night and that he really wanted to make up with you. Has he been by?"

"Yes. And don't ever butt into my work life again."

Brian slammed down the receiver. He could feel the monster struggling to get out. He opened his desk drawer and found what was needed to drown it.

Weeks passed, but progress was not being made the way the team of scientists had hoped. That situation led to more staff meetings with

Burlingame, more cover-your-behind memos, less time to work, and more frustration all around.

For Brian Banner, however, there was always a way to escape the pressures of the day, to deaden the anger that constantly roiled inside him and pushed for release.

Late one night, Brian found himself sitting alone in a corner booth at the Rusty Nail. With the pressure from his wife to have a child—and Rebecca didn't have to say anything, Brian could see it in her eyes—he avoided going home as much as he could. The MPs had never discovered the means by which the scientists had managed to sneak off-base on that night months ago, so Brian still had access to the town watering hole.

Brian had ideas about how to get the project on track, to reach their goal and make their budget and deadlines. But Burlingame didn't want to hear it. It seemed that Brian's altercation with McCallum—not to mention Brian's apparent dependence on alcohol—had soured Burlingame's opinion about the once-respected scientist. When a project like Clean Bill involved the use of radioactive materials, the last thing anyone wanted was an angry drunk handling isotopes. Brian had overheard the whispered conversations behind his back, the talks about pulling him off the project.

Idiots, he thought. *They're the ones who should be off the project, not me.* I'm *the irreplaceable one.*

Brian went to the men's room. As he came out, he bumped into a man who was passing by.

"You ever hear the words 'excuse me,' egghead?" the sullen, muscle-bound young man growled.

"*You* bumped into *me,* friend," Brian said evenly.

Brian was shoved from behind. He turned around.

The goon had three buddies, each uglier and more pumped up than the last. Each a veritable hulk of a man.

"We're waitin' for an apology . . . *friend,*" one of the muscle-heads said.

Brian frowned. "I don't have time for this." He tried to push past them.

They shoved Brian from one to the other, each shove harder than

the one before. Brian felt panic and rage . . . and the monster inside him fighting for release, and he did nothing to quell it.

In fact, he welcomed it.

The fight was mercifully brief . . . and thoroughly humiliating.

A local deputy sheriff kneeled down to help Brian up. "You better get back to the base, fella. The locals don't trust any'a you brainboys, so I'll walk you back to the base—make sure you get there without anymore trouble. But don't you ever come here again. I won't always be here to save you."

Brian nodded numbly as the deputy led him from the bar.

A half-hour later, Brian—quiet as he could be, which, drunk as he was, was rather loud—entered his house, only to find Rebecca waiting up. A book in her lap, she pretended to be reading, but there were tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Are . . . are you all right, Brian?"

"I'm fine," he snapped.

Let her just shut up. Let it wait until morning. Just let me climb into bed and drift off into oblivion.

"I can't wait for this horrible project to be over, Brian," Rebecca said. "All I want is for you to get a job somewhere normal so we can settle down and start a fam—"

"No!" Brian roared. "Not now! Isn't there ever *another* topic?"

He moved in on her quickly, growling like some rabid animal.

It was the monster in control now. He'd let the monster out.

And there was no stopping it now. . . .

Rebecca hadn't come out of the bedroom by the time Brian left for work.

He'd slept on the couch, and awakened with one hell of a hangover. After a quick shower, he'd shrugged back into his rumpled clothing and, unshaven and red-eyed, hurried off to work. He'd find some way to make up with Rebecca. Maybe flowers, or a bottle of champagne.

He'd make it right.

* * *

The last thing he expected to find when he arrived at his office was the broad-shouldered, uniformed stranger sitting in his chair.

"Who the hell are you?" Brian demanded.

"Colonel Carl Ronson, United States Army," the man replied. "I've been called in by Burlingame as a security consultant. Thought I should meet all the key players, see if there are any security concerns you might have."

"Well, I'm not pleased that a total stranger was able to come into my locked office."

"You'll have to forgive my flair for the melodramatic, Banner. I'll let you get to—" he glanced at his watch and sneered out the last word "—work."

Ronson walked out, ignoring the icy stare Brian leveled at him.

Ronson found an excuse to visit Brian's office every hour or two. What he hadn't told Brian was that the prime security problem he was called in to consult on was Brian himself. Burlingame and the rest of project administration were concerned about Banner's erratic behavior, both inside the compound and outside. The more Ronson visited, the more Banner drank to calm his nerves, and the more erratic his behavior became, leading to more concern on Ronson's part. Such was Banner's genius that he was not fired outright. Even in his distracted state, he still contributed significantly to the project. Ronson reported to Burlingame on his visits, and the old man elected to hang on to the brilliant, young scientist as long as he could. They were so close to their goal. So close.

Another week went by and Burlingame came to Brian's lab to see how his part of the research was going. Brian's was the key component. He was working on a muon field generator through which nuclear radiation would pass to be "cleaned." The process was possible in theory, but no one had ever come so close to achieving it before. Brian had made an atomic particle breakthrough that even Einstein had only considered theoretical.

Entering the lab, Burlingame and Brian both wore protective suits that made them look like beekeepers from Mars. Brian had loaded a

triggering device—he had dubbed it "the nuclear gun"—with raw plutonium. He would direct a beam of radiation from the gun through a muon field, and the radiation would come through the field with, hopefully, ninety-five percent of its energy intact, but with the radiation completely neutralized. This was why Brian was still around. He was the one man who could take the key element in the project from concept to execution.

But the man Burlingame worked beside was not the man he had hired. Handling by remote control the potentially lethal radioactive materials on the other side of the transparent wall, Brian's hands shook. His speech was slurred, and before they had put on their helmets, Burlingame acted clearly surprised by the stench of alcohol on Brian's breath. Brian made a comment about "needing a drop to sleep last night," but it was clear he'd had much more than that. The demonstration was impressive, despite Banner's impaired performance, but Burlingame left with his fears confirmed.

The next morning, Colonel Ronson came by for his first visit of the day. As he stepped into the room, his foot stepped in a puddle of single malt scotch whiskey that led to Banner's desk. An overturned bottle had soaked the papers—including the blueprints for the nuclear gun—scattered across the oaken surface. Brian snored loud and fitfully. Ronson shook him.

"I'm sorry, Rebecca," Brian mumbled. "So sorry. It won't happen again, I swear, I sw—"

"Get up, Banner," Ronson said sternly. "That's an *order,* man."

Brian blinked a few times, and swiftly sat upright in his chair. "Colonel Ronson. I was just taking a quick nap. I was up all night working and—"

"Save it, Banner," Ronson interjected. "Burlingame's been concerned about your performance, and I've thought you were a security risk from the day we met. You're a menace to everybody, including yourself." He turned toward the door. "Men. . . ."

Two burly MPs entered and pulled Brian from his seat.

"You're fired, Banner," Ronson said. "We'll pack up your things and send them home for you."

Brian tried to protest, but before he could say more than a couple of words, he was out of the room.

Rebecca watched as the MPs brought Brian up the walk. The shame and anger on his face was painful for her to look at. But she also felt as though a tremendous weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Now, the pressure of having to succeed on this project would be gone. Whatever Brian felt he had to prove to her, to himself, to his own father, to who knew what inner demons that drove him, that pressure was gone now. Now they could get on with their own lives, the lives she'd imagined for them: Brian with a fulfilling job, their own home, and children. Especially children.

A nice, quiet, *normal* life.

But the monster had other ideas.

Ronson's not as smart as he thinks, Brian thought, chuckling softly to himself as he sprung the new lock on his former lab. *I can sneak in and out of this place like Willie Sutton. I'm twice the intellect Ronson is, and intellect will* always *triumph. I will* not *be made a fool of. Ronson thought he'd humiliate me, making Rebecca watch me be brought home like some common criminal. Well, I'll show him the kind of man Brian Banner is—a man who honors his commitments, no matter* what *some stupid policeman may think. The man who will complete the project alone and ahead of schedule. I'll finish it tonight. And then let Colonel Ronson look out for* his *job!*

Focusing, concentrating like never before, Brian put all the safety measures in place. He lowered the shields, engaged the dampers. He stepped into his safety suit.

Can't take any chances with radiation. I owe it to Rebecca to make sure our children are normal. Brian glanced at the clock. Time was speeding by. He had to make sure he finished it all by morning; had to make sure he wasn't detected before he could succeed.

His mind raced like never before. Everything fell into place. He felt like da Vinci, like Michaelangelo, like Edison—both artist and scientist in one. And like those luminaries, Brian Banner, too, would

be remembered as the father of something great! There was no stopping him now, no stopping him at—

No.

Brian's eyes widened in shock as he stared at the control panel before him. *Oh, God,* he thought. *That dial was supposed to be turned* counter-*clockwise. What was I thinking?*

Quickly, he moved to reset the calibrations.

Too late.

The explosion rocked the entire complex. Sirens rang wildly. Lights flashed in disorienting patterns. The inner lab was now contaminated from the radiation unleashed by the explosion.

I can fix it, thought Brian. *No harm done, everything'll be okay.* He frowned. *Well, maybe it'll throw the project off a few weeks, but we can use that time to refine the process. Now, where were the controls for those auxiliary shields?* He scanned the control panel. *Ah, there's the lever. All I have to do is pull it and everything will be—*

"Hands in the air, Banner. *Now,* mister!"

Brian spun toward the source of the voice.

Ronson, revolver drawn, kicked the door open. "Lucky thing I showed up before you could sabotage the whole place."

Brian continued his reach for the lever, and Ronson fired. The bullet missed Brian but shattered the control panel. The safety monitors on the walls were reading off their screens.

"Ronson, you idiot!" Brian cried. "You've doomed the entire base!"

"Which is what you were trying to do to begin with!"

"You tin-plated martinet!" Brian shouted. "I'm not a saboteur, and you know that! I can contain the radiation, but only if you don't try to stop me."

Ronson thought for seconds that seemed like years. His eyes narrowed. "Do what you have to, Banner. Do it fast."

Adrenaline surged through Brian's body and mind. There was a crystal clarity about everything he was doing, moving switches and levers and dials in a manic ballet of grace and brilliance.

The spikes on the monitors retreated to lower levels. The radiation

count came down. The shields were in place and holding, or so it seemed.

The project was saved.

But Brian Banner's life was ruined.

At the court martial—Brian was wrong, his job *did* put him under military command—Burlingame and the others were relatively lenient. Even Ronson testified, if not in Brian's behalf, then at least fairly. He described Brian as an alcoholic, an egotist, and a fool. No more and no less.

"In the final analysis, he saved my life. The man is no monster," the colonel said.

Brian Banner received no prison time, but was forever banned from government work. Worse, the project was eventually abandoned. No congressman would continue to fight for funding for a clean energy project that had nearly contaminated several states. It was as if the project—as if Brian Banner himself—had never existed. Just like Brian's father Bruce had always wanted: to wipe Brian from existence. It seemed as if the monster had triumphed after all. The bright, hungry fire within Brian dimmed.

And, though doctor after doctor, expert after expert, told him there was no trace of radioactivity in his system, Brian became obsessed with the idea that somehow, *somehow,* radiation must have leaked through the laboratory's protective shielding. *Somehow* his genetic makeup must have been perverted, mutated.

Brian made a pact with himself. Now, more than ever, he would *never* have a child. Never allow who-knows-what monsters may be lurking in his genes to become unleashed.

With time, the bitterness and regret faded, though it was never far from the surface. Brian's reputation from the project left him a professional pariah. Any job offers that he'd lined up before the accident seemed to have disappeared overnight. Brian had a series of jobs well beneath his abilities; he realized, though, that he was lucky to be working at all. He learned to curb his drinking, to some degree, and even managed to repair his and Rebecca's damaged relationship.

Things were starting to work out.

* * *

It was a beautiful early spring evening, the sun sinking in an explosion of reds and oranges, wisps of cloud accenting the drama of the scene. Brian Banner's mood matched the day. He'd gotten the job offer, finally found an old college friend willing to take a chance on him and put him in charge of a major research project.

The celebratory dinner was at the finest restaurant in town. The champagne flowed. Brian and Rebecca danced until well past midnight. It was like they were newlyweds on their honeymoon again.

"Brian, let's be like this always," Rebecca said wistfully, cheek pressed against his chest.

Brian caressed her hair. "We will. I promise. With this new job, things will be like we always wanted them to be, Becca. It'll be a new start for us."

The cab dropped them off at their front door. Brian insisted on carrying her over the threshold . . . and into the bedroom.

The celebration continued long into the night.

Another day, later in the spring. Another return home for Brian from a triumphant day at the office, one of many he'd had at the new job. He opened the front door to be greeted . . . by streamers and balloons decorating the living room.

Not even close to my birthday, he thought. *Not our anniversary, either. Then what . . . ?*

"Welcome home . . . Poppa!" Rebecca came racing out of the kitchen, her face glowing, tears of joy in her eyes.

"You mean . . . but we were so careful . . . except for that one night. . . ."

Rebecca threw her arms around Brian's neck, drawing him into a deep kiss. His lips felt numb.

"Brian, it'll be wonderful. I swear it will. You'll be the best father, and I know I can be a good mom. And our child will be a genius . . . and good-looking, to boot, I'll bet. No matter what, we'll love him with all our hearts."

Brian gave her a hug and a kiss. He felt his world falling away from under him. *Don't ruin her moment, don't ruin her moment.*

"It . . . it's wonderful, Becca," he stammered. "I'm happy. Very happy. But . . . there's some work I just have to finish up. It may take me through dinner." He pulled away from her embrace and headed for the study.

"Okay, Mr. Big Shot Executive," Rebecca said happily. "But this weekend, we're really going to celebrate."

"Of course."

Brian went into his study, locked the door behind him. He slumped against the wood, strength draining from his limbs. With an effort, he crossed the room and opened the bottom drawer of his desk.

It's a special occasion, all right, Brian, he thought glumly. *Calls for a celebration. After all, how many days does a man find out that he's soon to father . . . a monster?*

Rebecca knocked on the door. "Brian . . . ?"

"Yes, dear," he replied wearily.

"Remember: If it's a girl, we'll call her Susan, after my mother. And if it's a boy . . . we'll name him after your father.

"We'll call him Bruce."

TRANSFORMATIONS

Will Murray

Illustration by Neil Vokes

General Thaddeus "Thunderbolt" Ross fumed.

A silver-haired bear of a man, he stood at the great window of his office overlooking one of the most extensive Air Force missile bases in the American Southwest, his brick-knuckled hands clasped behind his blue-uniformed back, malodorous cigar fuming in sympathy with his foul mood.

To the south, beyond a defensive ring of Nike and Hunter missiles, lay an uninhabitable desolation of tabletop mesas and towering tarantula-haunted buttes.

"Blast that miserable monster!" he muttered. "And confound those lily-livered milksop politicians in Washington for pardoning his green hide!"

"Did you say something, Father?" a small voice asked from the door.

Caught by surprise, Thunderbolt Ross—so-called because his voice made his junior officers think of a wrathful Zeus whenever he spoke—turned abruptly. He started coughing gray smoke.

"Blast these cheap cheroots, too," he hacked. "Ever since that martinet Castro took over that worthless Caribbean flyspeck of an island, a man can't buy a good smoke anymore!"

"Father, you know all this fretting isn't getting you anywhere," said Betty Ross.

"I am *not* fretting."

Reaching his side, Betty shot her father an askance look.

"I was fuming," he corrected.

"Over . . . that beast?"

"Humph! Beast is too good a word for that man-monster. He's a menace. Should be hunted down. But Washington tied my hands after that—that green Frankenstein tangled with the Metal Master."

Betty Ross touched her father's shoulder tenderly.

"Father, I want you to promise me one thing while I'm away."

"What's that?" Ross gruffed.

"Promise me that you'll put the Hulk out of your mind while I'm visiting Aunt Agatha."

Glowering, Thunderbolt Ross faced the window anew, his bushy brows beetling in annoyance.

"He's out there somewhere," he bit out. "I know he is."

"Or dead," Betty suggested.

"And as long as the Hulk lives, who knows who is safe?"

Bestowing a daughterly peck on her father's cheek, Betty said, "I must go now. Remember—the Hulk belongs to the past. Leave him there."

The jeep was waiting for Betty Ross when she exited the headquarters building. A dry wind was blowing out of the high desert. Strangely, it smelled of rain.

Reflexively, her eyes ranged the base, looking for any sign of Bruce Banner. But the man she loved, yet who seemed so strangely *unknowable*, was nowhere to be seen.

Odd that word would pop into her mind. Unknowable. But ever since the Hulk had first appeared, it was as if the creature represented some kind of barrier that had grown up between them.

Betty climbed aboard and told the driver to take her to the waiting helicopter. It whisked her to the pad, and soon an olive drab Huey was lifting her over the inhospitable desert, away from her cares, away from her worries, and away from the ghost of the green man-brute that had troubled her life for over a year now.

The monster had first been sighted in the high desert. Big, gray, immensely strong—"the Hulk" someone called him; ever since, that had been his name. The presence of such a menacing creature had triggered the worst paranoid fears since the Cold War among the officers of her father's command. They hunted him, denounced him as a foe of humanity.

But Betty wasn't so certain. Was the Hulk a violent monster who deserved to be tracked down and destroyed—or was he merely a misunderstood creature lashing out against the barbs of a suspicious humanity?

"I wonder," she breathed, as the bristling complex of rockets, missiles and armament fell behind the rattling helicopter. "I wonder. . . ."

The aircraft possessed no wings, no control surfaces, no external means of propulsion. Yet it skimmed low over the high desert, slipping between towering flat-topped mesas with an eerie soundless agility.

When it alighted, within sight of the great missile base, no landing gear deployed. The craft simply dropped like a smooth silvery egg, then cracked open like one.

A man emerged. Tall, of almost royal bearing, his boots touched the powdery desert sands like those of a conquering emperor of old. He wore royal scarlet and kingly purple. His horned helmet, scarlet and edged in violet, was of a design modeled after Greek war helms of antiquity. It enveloped his entire head except for joined eye holes out of which two icy blue eyes blazed. A vertical crack in the helmet's forbidding faceplate revealed just enough of the shielded features to suggest expression, yet show nothing of the man within.

If it was a man who stood in the high desert, a freshening breeze causing his purple cloak to flap and snap like an angry flag.

Gesturing with a gauntleted hand, he intoned, "Await me here, my magnetically-powered chariot."

In response, the egg resealed itself. Perfectly. No seam showed.

And toward the sprawling base, the mutant known only as Magneto directed his full attention, and the awesome powers at his command. . . .

Thunderbolt Ross was clipping off the end of his third cigar of the day when his desk telephone began ringing. And ringing and ringing. He snapped the receiver off its cradle and barked a gruff "Hello!" into the black mouthpiece.

No one answered. And the telephone continued inexplicably, endlessly, ringing. Up and down the halls, other phones joined in. Some were shrillng, others beeping and jangling in a swelling concert.

"Hello!" Ross shouted into the telephone. "Who's there, blast it!"

A white-faced airman came rushing in. "General Ross, base telephones are going haywire!" he blurted out.

"I can hear that, you ninny!" Thunderbolt bellowed. "Have somebody fix the dadgum things." He cradled the phone with a violent crash.

His phone continued complaining. Even after he yanked out the wires, it rang.

"Impossible," Ross said, his cigar sagging from loosening jaws. "This is plumb impossible. . . ."

A moment later, Thunderbolt Ross forgot all about the malfunctioning telephone system.

A bloom of white-hot fire filled his broad office window. Ross whirled. His jowely jaw sagged. Out on the proving grounds, a Nike missile went shooting off its rail launcher, trailing fire and arrowing for the high desert.

A dozen miles away, the irregular top of a butte came apart in a thunderous detonation of fire and rock dust. Seconds later, the operations building shook as the rolling shock wave hit.

"Who fired that missile?" Thunderbolt roared. "What noncom nincompoop gave the confounded order?"

And because the telephones were worse than useless, there was only one way to find out. Thunderbolt stormed from his office.

Outside, the base was in an uproar. Missile erector-launchers were elevating to pre-fire positions. A helicopter started revving up.

Ross commandeered a jeep, ordering the driver to take him to the stirring chopper.

Before they could reach it, the bird lifted off. As the windscreen caught the bright sunlight, they saw plainly, clearly, and unmistakably that there was no pilot at the stick.

"What in thunderation is happening to my base!" Ross barked over the cacophony of a U.S. military installation going absolutely mad.

There was no answer. Another missile took off in a roar of rocket fuel. A Hunter missile, it careened up to explode high in the northern sky like an ugly fireworks display.

When the fiery blast had spent itself and the smoke began to dissipate, an awe-inspiring sight was revealed.

Pieces of the missile, blindingly white-hot, hung low over the horizon. As Thunderbolt Ross watched, the suspended pieces regrouped as if manipulated by giant, unseen fingers.

The glowing metal fragments came together to form crude words. Words that burned with a white heat that slowly cooled before the old soldier's astonished eyes:

HULK. WE ARE BROTHERS. JOIN ME.

MAGNETO

Many miles to the south, Dr. Bruce Banner toiled in a secret underground laboratory in the low desert.

"I think I've found that faulty transistor," he muttered.

"What's that, Doc?" a youthful voice called from another chamber in the dank cave network.

"I said, I think I've fixed the problem with the gamma ray machine," Banner called out.

In the next room, teenager Rick Jones stood before the giant televisor screen that revealed commanding views of all approaches to the secret lab he shared with Bruce Banner, one of the word's foremost nuclear physicists. Hidden cameras showed the cave entrance, the surrounding desolation, and the craterlike lake that provided the complex with water. All clear.

The Air Force hadn't ventured this far south in months, Rick knew. Not since the government had given the Hulk an official pardon for beating off the global threat of the Metal Master, an alien being with the ability to manipulate ordinary earth metals through sheer brainpower.

But that didn't mean old Thunderbolt Ross didn't still harbor a grudge against the Hulk, Rick figured.

"Just a sec, Doc," Rick said, giving the last camera a check. It showed the long empty expanse that stretched between this isolated corner of New Mexico and the missile base where he had first met Bruce Banner.

It seemed like an eternity ago. Rick had driven his jalopy out on a dare to the forbidden test area of the base. He was just a kid then. What did he know?

For starters, Rick didn't know that that the area was cordoned off because the U.S. Air Force was about to detonate the most powerful nuclear device ever conceived, the awesome gamma bomb. Nor did he suspect that he was playing his harmonica on ground zero.

It was the bomb's inventor, Dr. Bruce Banner, who saved Rick by driving out and pushing him into a protective earthen trench lined with lead. Saved his life—but at a terrible cost to himself. Banner's thin form had taken the full brunt of the gamma blast.

That first night, he had transformed into something less than man, but somehow more than human, bulking up into a gray dim-witted monster. And that had only been the beginning of the nightmare.

Every night for months, Banner had become the Hulk. Over successive transformations, his dead-looking gray skin had ripened—if that was the word—to a corpsey green with each change. The Hulk! No other name fit. Possessing incalculable strength, cursed by an inhuman rage, the Hulk had become the scourge of the southwest.

It had been a violent and eventful first few months. Banner, seeking to control his brutish alter-ego, had constructed this underground lab and a concrete blockhouse under the lake, so that every night when skinny Bruce Banner metamorphosed into the Hulk, Rick could seal him in his unbreakable cell. Those long nights were the most nightmarish of all, with the restless Hulk pounding and pounding relentlessly against those superthick walls, growing stronger as he got madder and madder.

Only Rick Jones could control him then. Rick Jones, who was bound by loyalty to aid the human being who had saved his life, even as he feared the green-skinned horror called the Hulk.

Then Banner had devised the gamma ray machine that enabled him to transform into the Hulk and back again. It seemed a strange solution, but it was that or become the Hulk every time the sun went down.

Ultimately, the gamma ray machine had proven no solution at all. The controlled Hulk was more intelligent than the original brute, but he was also more ruthless. And of late, whenever Dr. Banner was forced to resort to the machine, it malfunctioned in strange and terrifying ways.

Snapping out of his reverie, Rick Jones reached over to deactivate the camera array.

Off in the distance, something went screaming up into the sky on a column of fire, then explode into a million trailing pieces.

When the smoke cleared, burning words filled the sky. The same searing message that, at this very moment, was being seen by Thunderbolt Ross, miles away.

Rick pulled back the camera, enlarging the view. His eyes went wide. "Doc! Come running! You gotta see this!" he yelled over his shoulder.

Bruce Banner came from the other room, concern written all over his pinched, pale features.

"What is it, Rick? What's wrong, boy?"

"Look."

Banner stepped up to the screen. The message of incandescent steel was phasing down from white to red to a smouldering orange.

"Magneto. . . ." he breathed.

"Wasn't that the joker who made a mess at Cape Citadel last summer?" Rick muttered.

"Yes. No one knows who he is, but he's believed to have harnessed the incredible power of magnetism. I wonder what he wants with the Hulk?"

"There's one way to find out—if you got that transistor problem licked like you say."

Banner frowned. "Even if I do, each time I use the gamma machine, it saps my strength, leaving Bruce Banner even weaker."

"Yeah. But not the Hulk."

Resolutely, Banner shucked off his white lab smock and wriggled out of his shirt. His dungarees came off next, revealing the purple stretch trunks that the world had come to associate with the incredible Hulk.

"I pray the Hulk is equal to this challenge," he said, striding over to the gamma device.

Rick trailed him worriedly. "I just hope that kookie ray doesn't malfunction again. Remember what happened last time, Doc? You became the Hulk, all right—but you still had Bruce Banner's head."

Wordlessly taking his place on the control grid, Bruce Banner faced the machine, took a deep breath and shut his tense eyes. His bare toes found the control studs and after sequencing them and disabling the safety interlock, the scientist's big toe came to rest on the rounded button that activated the device.

Rick retreated to the safety of a lead shield.

With a threatful humming, the machine powered up and a purling streak of green energy poured forth, striking Banner's nearly naked form.

"Ugh!" Sounding like a man being kicked by an elephant, Banner jerked back. As Rick watched, the lanky scientist's pale body rippled with a shimmering green energy.

In a moment, he stood seven feet tall, seven times his original mass, powerful, indominable, briefly glowing a luminous green.

The ray shut off, coming to the end of its cycle.

And in Bruce Banner's place stood the incredible Hulk—massive, muscular, more than a man yet less than human!

In a deep, growling voice, the Hulk said, "Magneto, huh? I wonder what he wants with me?" He stepped off the control grid.

"Wait!" Rick cried.

The Hulk froze, his suspicious eyes going to the teenager's lanky form. "What is it *this* time?" he demanded.

"Look at yourself, Hulk. *Look!*"

Glowering, the Hulk raised his muscular arms. And his eyes popped wide in shock.

For instead of the Hulk's emerald complexion, he saw Bruce Banner's pale skin encasing the Hulk's rippling musculature!

"What the—" the Hulk growled, flexing and unflexing his huge pale hands.

"You can't be seen looking that that!" Rick exclaimed. "People will know the Hulk has a human side!"

"Don't you think I know that!" the Hulk snapped. "Blast this ray! I thought Banner had it fixed."

"So did Banner," Rick returned. "What are you going to do about Magneto, Hulk? He's making mincemeat of the base."

"What *can* I do?" the Hulk raged in a voice so powerful it made

delicate lab instruments vibrate. "Bah! Why is it Banner is never around when I wanna wring his scrawny neck?"

Rick snapped his fingers. "Wait! I have an idea. You're the Hulk except for the color of your skin, right?"

The Hulk loomed over the teenager. "Yeah. So what?"

"Isn't there a dye factory up in Murietta?"

The Hulk's beetling black eyebrows writhed together in thought. "You mebbe have half a brain, after all," he growled.

"Be careful, Hulk!" Rick called, as the lumbering behemoth pushed past him.

"Save it, squirt. The Hulk ain't afraid of no costumed pantywaist."

Racing to the televisor, Rick activated the entrance approach camera in time to watch the Hulk stride out of the cave mouth only two people in the world knew existed—three if one counted the Hulk as a separate person, which Rick secretly did.

Bracing himself on massive bent legs, the Hulk swept his thick arms back, and bringing them forward again, kicked off into space.

The ground actually shook under the tremendous recoil. Rick grabbed the console to steady himself. No matter how many times he witnessed the Hulk in action, it always brought his heart leaping into his throat and dried the saliva in his gaping mouth.

The strangely-pale Hulk shot away like a human cannonball.

"Good luck," Rick breathed. He wasn't really sure if he was wishing the Hulk well or offering a prayer to Magneto, who had no conception of what he had roused.

Bounding in giant leaps, the Hulk crossed the intervening desert in fantastic ground-shaking leaps that caused rock dust to cascade from the steep, corrugated sides of the surrounding buttes.

They heard him coming in Murietta. They didn't know what it was. They only knew that the earth shook in a regular pistoning rhythm. And each thud sounded closer and closer, like the approaching tread of doom. . . .

It was a Saturday, so the Murietta Dye Works was operating at half-shift, which was a good thing. Had there been more workers

around the big, steaming vats of dye, someone might have been injured when the roof caved in, raining debris into the vats.

Something big and ponderous splashed directly into the vat marked "Avocado." It hit with tremendous force, throwing up so much scalding dye that the surrounding walls turned green.

Panicky workers rushed from the building, and so missed a dramatic sight.

Out of the avocado vat emerged a hulking behemoth, muscles dripping with steaming green dye. He walked with eyes shut to keep the stinging stuff out of his brown eyes.

Blindly, the Hulk groped for a door. His dripping fingers encountered a blank wall instead. With an impatient backhand swipe, he reduced it to kindling, then emerged into the clear light of day.

"It's the Hulk!" a voice cried. And the milling workers ran off in all directions.

No one saw the Hulk clearly. So they never noticed he was dripping wet, never suspected the greenish tinge of his skin and hair was just starting to set.

After he shot into the sky in a tremendous, ground-shuddering leap, they found his wet, avocado footprints in the crater made by the force of his upkicking feet. That evening, local newscasters wondered what manner of creature left *green* footprints. The question was never resolved, and so another unsolvable myth was added to the ever-growing legend of the Hulk.

High over the desert, the Hulk could see once again. The rush of air had dried his dyed skin. It wasn't the gamma green of the true Hulk, but no one would know the difference.

Least of all Magneto in the few seconds before the Hulk mopped up the southwest with his soon-to-be broken body.

The message in the sky had cooled to a scorched black when the Hulk dropped from the sky to the summit of a vast tabletop mesa. His menacing eyes swept the base below.

It was a shambles. There were fires. Soldiers running about. But no sign of the purple-cloaked form of Magneto.

With a powerful two-legged kick, the Hulk catapulted himself into

the air, aiming for the hanging letters of mangled space-age metal. His green fists slammed through them. They came apart like so much tinfoil.

Landing on the ground, the Hulk stood waiting, waiting for his challenger to show his face—if he dared. . . .

Thunderbolt Ross was beside himself. His base was useless. Worse, it was defenseless. Not a tank or jeep would run. The electrically controlled main gates refused to respond. He had lost two missiles, neither authorized to launch.

"There's going to be hell to pay!" he raged. "And if I don't get a move on, it's going to cost me my stars, not to mention my command."

Then, the Hulk had appeared.

An emerald missile in human form, he exploded through the weirdly-levitated letters in the sky.

"There!" Ross bellowed. "Proof that the Hulk is behind this blasted outrage. Wait'll they hear about this in Washington!"

A sergeant came running up, carrying a two-star combat helmet and a Thompson sub-machine gun, saying, "Here, sir!"

Ross shook off his cap and donned the helmet. Charging the Thompson, he lifted his Olympian voice: "Follow me, men! We're going Hulk hunting!"

Magneto held the missile base under effortless thrall. Not an engine could start, except by his leave. No weapon could fire while the electromagnetic power of his body held firing pins and triggers and safety latches in place. No one could enter; no one could leave.

And high overhead, his dramatic message intended for the Hulk hung in a lowering sky, held in position by the indominable power of his mutant mind.

All this from a remote position. All this because he was Magneto, greatest among *Homo superior.*

But where was the Hulk?

The question hung in the still air.

Then, without warning, the Hulk appeared.

He seemed to come from nowhere. A high, vaulting leap, and his thick, green fists collided with the magnetically-suspended letters.

Magneto steeled himself for the impact.

Three seconds to impact. Two. One . . .

Car-rannngg!

"Ugh!"

Magneto felt the feedback shock from helmet to boots. It made him reel as he momentarily lost magnetic control over his surroundings. Bracing himself, he turned his blazing gaze in the direction of the now-descending Hulk.

"You are indeed strong, green one," he murmured. "But no matter how strong you may be, yours is the strength of meat and bones, and as such nothing to the pure power of natural magnetism."

As the unheeding Hulk dropped toward the desert floor, the falling shards of Hunter missile regrouped, chasing him down, impelled by invisible lines of magnetic force.

When the Hulk hit the ground, the earth trembled. He paused, bent-kneed, preparing to leap anew.

Suddenly, silvery shards surrounded him like flashing, abstract bats. They embraced his tough hide, adhering to portions of his chest, arms and legs, bringing a roar from the startled monster.

Iron-hard green fingers peeled the first ones free. But there were too many pieces to deal with. They curled around bursting bicep and cabled calf muscle until the Hulk was a crazyquilt of green flesh and silvery-white metal.

Within his helmet, Magneto smiled thinly. "Now you will see who is the superior. . . ."

The expression on the Hulk's wide face went from angry to startled as he found himself lifting off the ground. Before his brutish mind could grasp what was happening, he was transported a quarter mile and deposited at the spot where Magneto stood waiting with folded arms, purple cloak settling on his proud back.

"I am Magneto," the mutant announced imperiously.

The Hulk glowered. "So what?"

"Disregard the unorthodox manner in which I bring you before me, but I have heard much of your prowess and thought it time that

we—two of the most powerful creatures inhabiting this planet—should meet.''

The Hulk glowered. ''You picked the wrong guy to attack, fancy pants.''

Without warning, a shard of missile exploded in Magneto's direction. Though startled, he redirected it around him in a wide loop.

''Incredible! That shard was held in place by the power of Magneto!''

''Bah! It's nothing compared to what I got in store for you,'' the Hulk flung back, digging remorseless fingers under a patch of metal affixed to his heaving chest.

With a gesture, Magneto caused the metal piece to contract, wringing a painful gasp from the Hulk's barrel chest.

Magneto raised a purple hand in warning. ''Hold! I can inflict even greater agony.''

''Save it for the tiny tots!'' the Hulk growled. ''You came spoiling for a fight. Now you got one—in spades.''

''I come not for battle, but—''

The swiping green paw was not unexpected, but the speed with which the Hulk lashed out was. Magneto never finished his sentence. He took a single protective step backward. At the same time, he levitated the Hulk thirty feet, turned him upside down, and set him pinwheeling in place.

''You will tire of this before I do,'' Magneto warned.

The Hulk curled into a ball. Magneto smiled. Clearly, the dull brute was already succumbing to his superior might.

Levitating himself effortlessly, Magneto rose to a height equal to that of the helplessly circling behemoth.

''Now, if you are weary of resistance—''

The Hulk's head rose up with a sudden wrench. With his gleaming, elephantine teeth, he tore free a bent section of missile. And spat it out!

So ferocious was the look in the emerald giant's blazing eyes, Magneto forgot to magnetically capture the falling shard. It clipped his purple cloak in passing.

The Hulk next seemed to explode in all directions. Metal fragments

flew every which way. His crushing fingers pried at shards with wild abandon, throwing them off like bright leaves.

Magneto raised his steely voice. "I warn you, Hulk. All that holds you up are those bits of metal. And all that holds *them* aloft is the power of Magneto's mind."

"You don't scare the Hulk," the green creature snarled. "I beat The Toad Men to a pulp. I crushed Tyrannus. I kicked the Metal Master off the planet. What makes you think *you* can frighten me?"

"My natural powers," Magneto said firmly. With a gesture, he sent the Hulk shooting higher, ever higher, into the low-hanging clouds above.

Cloak fluttering, Magneto soared after him. Pieces of metal continued to rain down.

"He is very brave or very mad," Magneto murmured. "Either way I have use for him."

The clouds were moist, like entering foggy cotton. Magneto felt his cloak grow increasingly heavy as water vapor seeped into its royal purple fabric. "I offer you a chance, Hulk. A chance to survive. A chance for a new life."

"Go peddle your papers!" the Hulk snarled. Miraculously, he had managed to wrench the adhering metal free of both arms and one leg until he hung upside down from his remaining metal-sheathed limb. Stubbornly, his body arching up in a muscle-tearing posture so those clutching green paws could seize the few metallic sections holding him aloft, he struggled to free himself from Magneto's invisible thrall.

"I warn you, Hulk—" Magneto began.

Green-tinged sweat oozed from the Hulk's pores. "No, I warn *you.* Turn me loose or I'll—"

"The universal power of magnetism is mine to command!" Magneto broke in. "It is clear that your dull brain does not grasp this critical fact. Behold, then, the irresistable power of Magneto!"

The Hulk abruptly dropped like a plummet, his spine all but twisting from the sudden drop. He fell twenty feet. Thirty.

Then came to a ludicrous halt, still hanging by one green-muscled leg.

Magneto floated down to join him. "All things that are subject to

magnetic influence bow to my will,'' he began. ''If I wish it, the electrons gathering in the storm cloud above will heed my call.''

As if to punctuate the boast, a rolling peal of thunder broke, and rain poured downward in hard-driving torrents.

The Hulk had never been so angry. Never felt so helpless. No matter what it took, he was going to break loose. And then. . . .

When the cold rain struck his impervious hide, it was just another annoyance. But when green fingers touched silver metal, they left avocado prints.

The dye! he thought. *It's running!*

And the confident voice of Magneto was calling through the drumming rain, ''What do you say now, Hulk?''

Frantically, the Hulk wrenched away the last section of metal. His leg came free. His body cartwheeled, and he found himself hanging one-handed from the suspended shard.

His eyes met with those of the magnetic mutant. But only for an instant.

Without warning, the Hulk let go.

He fell a quarter-mile to the hard desert floor, his body bouncing when it struck. The Hulk lay still but only for a moment. Regaining his feet, the Hulk shook himself like a mighty mastiff shakes off a hard rain.

Calmly, Magneto descended.

A boulder came up to meet him. He avoided it. Then another was flung skyward. And another. As the magnetically-spawned rainstorm pounded the hard, arid ground below, another storm raged upward. A Hulk-created storm of rock and boulders.

It staggered the imagination to think that one brute could move so much material by muscle power alone, but the evidence lay before Magneto's eyes.

Unable to manipulate mineral rock, Magneto retreated to a nearby mesa. By the time he reached its lofty eminance, the green brute was nowhere to be seen. Blazing blue eyes ranged the horizon, but there

was no sign of the man-monster. He could not be dead, Magneto reasoned. For no one hurled two-ton boulders in their death-throes.

Then, in the near distance, came the combined roar of jeeps and clanking rumble of advancing tanks. Magneto frowned thinly. The matter of the Hulk had forced him to relinquish control over the missile base and its compliment of men and material.

It was time to show the lowly humans that Magneto still held sway over their puny kind. . . .

In the underground bunker, Rick Jones was frantically punching up camera angles on the televisor screen. What he had managed to see left him scared and confused. This Magneto was no slouch—he had had the Hulk cold several times. But having the Hulk and beating him were two different things.

But where was the Hulk now . . . ?

It was not long before a familiar thudding tread announced the return of Bruce Banner's brutish alter ego.

Rick rushed to meet the monster at the cave mouth. The Hulk was a sorry sight. Wet strings of green liquid drooled off his damp hair and skin to pool at his mottled flesh-and-avocado feet.

"He beat you. . . ." Rick began.

"Nobody beats the Hulk," the greenish goliath snarled. "The blasted dye started running. I couldn't let him see me wearing Banner's weak pink skin."

"Sure, Hulk. I understand. He didn't beat you," Rick said hurriedly. "But what will you do now?"

"What can I do? Except return to being Banner. He's got to fix that machine so I can get back out there."

Rick wiped sweat from his forehead. "Whatever you say, Hulk."

Leaving massive avocado footprints, the Hulk lumbered to the gamma machine. His big toes clumsily worked the grid buttons until the device was humming into higher and higher intensities.

The projector flared. A purling energy bolt struck him square in the chest. Once more, shimmering waves of gamma rays enveloped him. And once more the strangest transformation of all time was taking place—in reverse.

When it was over, Bruce Banner slumped to the floor. Rick rushed to his side. "Doc—Doc! Are you okay?"

"Fine . . . Rick," Banner said, weak-voiced. "Am I—am I back to normal?"

"Not exactly," Rick said thickly.

"What . . . do you mean . . . ?"

"You're Banner again. But your skin, it's—"

Bruce Banner's eyes went to the shiny grid beneath him—it was awash in green dye. But through the spill he could see his face reflected in the metal. It was Bruce Banner's thin face, but the blue eyes were an emerald green. And the surrounding facial skin was the color of fresh limes.

"I'm green!" he croaked.

"It's okay. It's okay," Rick reassured him. "You need rest. Let me get you to your room."

Half-dragging, half-carrying the frail scientist, Rick got him to his cot. "You just rest, Doc. Magneto can't find us here. You rest up. We'll figure this out later."

But Bruce Banner didn't hear. Sapped of his normal strength, he had already fallen asleep.

General Thunderbolt Ross rode in the lead jeep, bracing himself against every rock and rut of desert terrain that the vehicle bounced over.

"There he is!" he bellowed, pointing with the Thompson muzzle to the purple-and-scarlet figure of Magneto poised atop a mesa. "Fan out! Surround him!"

Behind him, the tank and truck column broke in two directions, creating the leading edges of a classic pincer attack.

Magneto stepped up to the edge of the mesa, looking down through the blaze-rimmed eyeports of his Grecian-style helmet. Wordlessly, he lifted his arms.

And every engine went dead.

"What the ding-dong hell!" Thunderbolt complained.

"Engine quit, sir!" said his driver.

It got worse. The jeep levitated off the ground. Thunderbolt Ross

was slammed down into his seat. He hung on as the jeep swept up the steep side of the mesa like an open construction elevator.

It came to a four-point landing in the center of the mesa's flat summit, and Thunderbolt Ross piled out of the vehicle, training his Thompson on the gaudy figure striding purposefully toward him.

"Halt, or I'll shoot!" he warned.

"Allow me," intoned Magneto.

Of its own volition, the Thompson erupted in Thunderbolt's two-fisted grip. A stream of bullets chattered in Magneto's direction. They should have chopped him in two. Instead, the bullet stream miraculously turned a downward right angle and spelled out the letter M at his feet.

A purple hand gestured. The Thompson wrenched itself out of the general's unresisting grip, and began to slowly turn in place, trigger still locked down, muzzle spewing smoking death.

Thunderbolt Ross watched, transfixed as the macabre instrument of death, nervously ejecting cartridge smoking shells, turned its wrath in his direction.

"I seek the Hulk. Where is he?" Magneto demanded.

Hands clapping his helmet, Ross hit the ground.

"Answer quickly, or death is yours," Magneto warned.

The general muttered a pungent, "Go to blazes!"

At the last possible moment, the clip ran empty. The weapon fell silent. Then it fell to the ground, inert.

Thunderbolt Ross peered up at the towering form that was Magneto. He opened his mouth.

Magneto spoke first. "I have other ways of wresting the truth from you." He raised a gauntleted hand.

Suddenly, Magneto's attention was drawn southward. He turned, as if hearing a summoning voice.

"I am done with you," he told Ross in a contemptuous tone of voice.

A silvery egg suddenly dropped down, cracked open, and Magneto took the scarlet-cushioned seat within. In a heartbeat, the object whisked the bizarre being from sight.

Down below, a succession of clanking thuds brought Thunderbolt

to his feet and to the mesa's edge—just in time to see his tanks spank up dust clouds. With the departure of the oddly-garbed interloper, the magnetic forces that had levitated the vehicles suddenly released their relentless hold.

Turning to his driver, Thunderbolt yelled, "Don't just stand there gawking—drive us down!"

The expression on the driver's face was priceless. It asked: *How?*

Magneto had sensed a powerful electromagnetic field. The force and flux lines suggested a great electromagnetic generator to the south.

Magneto frowned. Strange. His initial survey of the area showed only desolation. Yet the energy he had detected seemed to be coming from the vicinity of a still lake in the hollow of a meteor crater.

Perhaps, it would lead him to the Hulk. . . .

Rick Jones stood watch at the electronic TV monitor, worrying. What if General Ross's forces came? What if Magneto found this cave? Bruce Banner's secret would be out. Not for the first time, Rick regretted that reckless drive through the gamma bomb test area.

The cave-entrance sensors should have sounded an alarm if someone stepped near the open mouth. The entrance camera should have overridden Rick's chosen view.

None of these things happened. Instead, Rick sat with his back to the entrance, oblivious, until a cold voice demanded:

"Where is the Hulk?"

Rick jumped like a cat.

Magneto, big as life, strode toward him. "Answer my question, stripling!"

"I don't know what you're—"

Magneto's eyes flashed, and Rick was slammed against the rock ceiling by the chair he'd been perched on.

"Speak!" Magneto commanded.

"He—he's locked up," Rick managed.

"Show me!"

"Let me down!"

The chair descended. Rick hopped off. Making a show of dusting

off his dungarees, he asked, "What do you want with the Hulk anyway?"

"That is between the Hulk and Magneto."

"Suit yourself," Rick said grudgingly. "Follow me."

Magneto fell in behind him. Rick sensed an urging pressure at his back. It was the same sensation that two magnets of opposing polarities made. The power of repulsion. It felt like a tangible thing.

"I keep the Hulk locked up at night," he explained.

"Who are you to the Hulk?"

"His keeper."

"Keeper?" Behind his helmet, Magneto's eyebrows rose in veiled surprise.

"Yeah. You've heard of being your brother's keeper, haven't you?"

Magneto said nothing.

They came to the rock chamber and its ten-foot-thick slab of concrete door held in place by a gigantic ramrod of timber and steel.

Rick went to the control panel, saying, "I gotta open it."

"Open it, then."

Rick hit the switch. Hydraulics, fed by lakewater, began to toil. With a gritty grinding, the steel-bound redwood ramrod began to revolve and back away, ponderously hauling the concrete door out of his rock frame.

When a man-sized slit was revealed, Rick told Magneto, "I don't dare open it any wider, or he'll escape."

"Magneto fears no man or monster," said the haughty cloaked man as he slipped into the narrow opening.

"It's your funeral," Rick muttered. Abruptly, he reversed the hydraulics, crying, "Hulk, it's Magneto. He's come for you!"

It was a bluff. But it worked. Before he could react, Magneto found himself sealed in the atom-bomb proof chamber.

Rick raced back to Banner's room, calling, "Doc! Doc! It's Magneto! He's trapped!"

Bruce Banner snapped awake. Rolling out of bed, he said, "What is it? What did you say?"

"Magneto. I got him locked in the vault! But it won't be long before he's out again. You gotta become the Hulk again. You gotta."

Bruce raced for the gamma ray room on naked green feet, his features worried. "Only a dire emergency would compel me to face the gamma machine again so soon."

As he stepped onto the control grid, strange sounds came from the vault. Groaning timber. Screeching metal. Tormented servo motors.

And a long grinding of rock and concrete. . . .

The gamma rays filled the room with an all-penetrating emerald light. Recoiling, Bruce Banner stood buffeted by the cell-transforming bombardment of radiation. Over the roar of the device, a scream was heard. Was it of pain? Or rage? Or mortal agony? Rick could not tell.

When it was over, the Hulk stood in his place.

But it was a Hulk Rick had not seen in months.

He was huge, hulking, dull of face. The color of his skin was the exact hue of lead. Under a disordered mop of black hair, uncomprehending gunmetal-colored eyes ranged the room . . . and locked on Rick.

"What is this place?"

"Don't you remember? You're—"

A thunderous commotion shook the cavern room. A splintering of wood and steel announced that Magneto had broken free!

Rick said, "Hulk! An enemy has come for you!"

"Enemy? All humans are the Hulk's enemy."

"Those are exactly the words I wish to hear," came a cold, calculating voice.

Into the room stepped Magneto—proud, imperious and utterly without concern that he had entered a room in which stood the most ferocious engine of destruction on the planet.

The Hulk's suspicious eyes took in the fantastic figure. "You want the Hulk. Why?"

"Because we are brothers, you and I."

A peculiar expression crossed the Hulk's face. "Why do you hide your face if we are brothers?"

"So that the world does not know the true face of he who is destined to rule them. The face of Magneto."

"Magneto . . ."

"Greatest among *Homo superior*," the master of magnetism said proudly. "The most powerful mutant living. I bring you an offer, Hulk. Join me. Be the first enlistee in my Brotherhood of Mutants. Riches and power beyond your wildest imaginings shall be yours."

"Are you crazy?" Rick snapped. "He doesn't care about—"

He suddenly found himself spinning in place until he was flat on the floor dizzy, a helpless pawn of invisible magnetic fingers.

"Join you. . . ." the Hulk said slowly.

"Yes," Magneto purred soothingly. "Two races now inhabit this planet: ordinary *Homo sapiens*, and beings such as you and I. *Homo superior*. Imbued with tremendous powers. Annointed by destiny. We will wrest this world for our own. But we cannot do it alone. In numbers there is strength. In strength there is power. What say you, Hulk?"

"Puny humans have always hunted the Hulk," the gray-skinned creature retorted. "Shot at him. Tried to kill him. Why should I trust you?"

"Because my power, as I have demonstrated, is limitless," said Magneto, his blazing gaze going to a nearby generator.

The bulky apparatus came off its anchor pins with a blend of loud snaps as they were sheared free by invisible magnetic fingers. The generator rose ten feet, froze in place, then resettled with a seismic thud.

Behind his mask, Magneto smiled. The Hulk regarded this tableau with a a dull, unchanging mein.

"Why *not* trust me?" asked Magneto. "How can you not trust such power as I wield?"

The Hulk lumbered closer. His brutish eyes were clouded. "Trust. . . ." he murmured, as though entranced.

"Yes. Hulk. Trust. As my message said, we *are* brothers." Magneto extended a gloved hand toward the behemoth. "Take my hand. Take the hand of power supreme and swear fealty to Magneto, first among equals."

Rick Jones jumped between them. "No! Hulk! Wait!"

The Hulk hesitated.

"Listen to me, Hulk," Rick continued gently. "You're not humanity's enemy. Washington pardoned you, remember? No one's hunting you now!"

"Pardon. . . ." the Hulk said slowly.

"Yeah. Don't you remember?"

The Hulk touched his gray brow. "Brain clouded. Can't remember. . . ."

"The laws of *Homo sapiens* are transparent," Magneto insisted. "They mean nothing. Humanity will go back on its word whenever it suits them. Take it from one who is hunted and feared like you."

"You make sense. . . ." the Hulk said ponderously.

"You can't mean that, Hulk! You can't!" Rick blurted.

"Silence, stripling," Magneto hissed, "Lest I destroy you where you stand."

Rick addressed the Hulk, eyes imploring. "You wouldn't let him do that, would you, Hulk? We're pals. Remember?"

The Hulk stood as if unthinking. The expression on his wide gray face was that of a stone—cold, unfeeling, inhuman. As Rick watched, it seemed that with each passing second, less and less of Bruce Banner could be seen in the Hulk's brutish features.

Magneto again stretched out a gauntlet-sheathed hand.

Hesitating, the Hulk lifted a broad gray paw.

Their hands sought one another.

Rick blocked them. Defiantly, his back to the Hulk, he faced Magneto. "You're barking up the wrong tree."

Magneto looked down. "What do you mean, boy?"

"You got the Hulk all wrong. He's no mutant. He's a *monster.*"

"Mutations produce monsters such as this," Magneto countered.

"Look around you. The Hulk was created here. Created by gamma rays. He's not a mutant, but a freak created by radiation. Inside, he's just an ordinary guy."

"Human!" Magneto was stunned by the revelation. "The Hulk is human?"

"*Was,*" Rick replied. "*Now* look at him—a brainless brute."

Magneto scrutinized the Hulk's dull features as if searching for the truth written there.

"Is this true?" Magneto demanded of the Hulk.

"Hulk does not remember."

Behind his scarlet helmet, the eyes of Magneto grew colder. "You were green before. Now you are gray," he murmured.

"The radiation does that to him," Rick said fearfully. "Every time he becomes the Hulk, he's different." He was betraying the Hulk's deepest secret, but he had no choice. No choice at all.

"You lie!" the Hulk raged, lashing out. "The Hulk was never human! The Hulk hates all things human!"

Rick dodged the swiping paw. He rolled under it, out of range.

Stepping back, Magneto said to the Hulk, "This has the ring of truth. You are but a man turned monster. I have no place for you in my coming brotherhood. Since you possess nearly limitless strength, and cannot be controlled, you pose a threat to my all-important plans."

The generator came off the floor, moving sideways. Like a slow-moving freight engine, it crowded the Hulk into a rock-faced wall.

The Hulk met it with his great gray arms. He was strong, but the magnetic power behind the machine was stronger still. Inexorably, his elbows bent double. Soon, he was pressed flat against the wall, his rib cage crackling under the increased pressure as Magneto sought to slowly, steadily crush the life from him.

Rick screamed, "Hulk! Don't just take it. Fight back. Fight back, Hulk!"

"He cannot," Magneto said. "He is a mere brute, while I control—"

There was no warning, unless the low, building growl emanating from the Hulk's pulsing throat could be called a warning. A howl of hate filled the rock chamber.

The apparatus lurched. A jerking, uncertain motion, but so unexpected that Magneto actually shuddered from the feedback.

For the Hulk, against all odds, against all reason, was steadily, relentlessly, forcing the generator away from his straining body. Great, gray ropes of vein stood out on his straining musculature. An artery pulsed on his sweating forehead. His eyes squeezed tight in a Herculean effort of indominable will.

Magneto raised a fist, tightened it. The generator inched forward—but only an inch. The mighty thews of the Hulk held it at bay, held it poised.

As Rick watched, it became a contest of wills—man versus monster, muscle versus mind, earthly strength against unearthly magnetism.

"You are but a man, Hulk," Magneto scoffed. "You cannot hope to defeat one who is born of the atom. You are subhuman. I am beyond human. You are—"

The Hulk roared in anger.

Thick, gray fingers took hold of projecting tubes and coils, were exerting a powerful opposing effort. With an unleashing of pent-up fury, the Hulk gave a two-handed wrench.

The apparatus came apart in his hands!

Too late, Magneto realized what had transpired. He thought his powers had succeeded in crushing man and machine into one inseparable lump. Instead, magnetic forces acted to complete the Hulk's raw act of destruction.

Pieces of machinery falling all around him, the Hulk flung himself forward, sweeping debris aside, ready to battle anew.

Magneto mentally released the generator. Sections fell like dropped puppetry.

"Go get him, Hulk!" Rick shouted.

For his pains, Rick found himself levitated into the Hulk. Gray hands seized him, and pushed him roughly aside.

Head low, the Hulk made a lumbering lunge for Magneto.

From Rick's point of view, the Hulk seemed to strike Magneto in the chest with a two-handed blow that would have reduced any other man's rib cage to kindling.

Instead, the Hulk's blocky fists bounced off harmlessly.

"You cannot penetrate the force field of Magneto, you brainless, leaden lump!" Magneto sneered.

It was the wrong thing to say. Perhaps there was no correct thing to say. Goaded, the Hulk struck again. And again his fists flew back. He howled. He roared. Twin pistons operating in tandem, his fists pummelled and pounded the unseen barrier.

Magneto stood his ground, though a flicker of fear troubled his eyes. "I am unbeatable!" he taunted. But something in his chill voice betrayed uncertainty.

The Hulk pounded on and on and on, his fists impacting with magnetic forces that refused to surrender.

Slowly, Magneto found himself backing away, impelled by the sheer brute force exerting itself against his field of magnetic force. His cloaked back came within inches of rock face. But the field held.

"You cannot keep this up forever," Magneto warned. "Sooner or later, you will know fatigue."

"Don't bet on it," Rick broke in. "He's the Hulk. He *never* gets tired."

"Impossible," Magneto spat. "Everything that lives, eventually tires. Even mutants."

"The Hulk isn't a mutant," Rick retorted. "He's not like anything that ever lived. Isn't that right, Hulk?"

Venting a bestial, answering roar, the Hulk jumped in place. A low, muscular jump. But it made the floor crack and hop like a seismic event.

Surprise peeping through his half-concealed features, Magneto abruptly lost his sneer of anticipated triumph. He fell. And the Hulk reached out a ham-sized hand and took hold of his rivet-studded breastplate, no longer protected by magnetic repulsion.

Eyes shocked wide, arms outflung, Magneto found himself flying down the corridor, propelled by sheer muscle power.

Before his helpless body could pulp itself against the rock terminus, he abruptly swerved right, into the televisor room and floated along the long tunnel that led to the outside world, cloak flapping like a wind-churned flag.

In pounding pursuit came the Hulk, a grim, gray engine of destruction.

The Hulk burst out into the light of day. His thick features looked right, then left, seeking his foe.

"Up here, you worthless clod!"

The Hulk looked skyward to see Magneto standing in midair as if on a sheet of transparent glass.

With a howl, the Hulk launched himself straight up.

It was the last thing Magneto expected. He was standing on a simple platform of unseen magnetic flux lines. The Hulk struck it like a gray volcano exploding upward.

Magneto found himself careering up, higher and faster than expected, struggling to keep his balance. Concentrating the force of his mutant mind downward, Magneto slowed his upward climb, then stopped.

"Now—fall to your doom!" he taunted.

An angry gray hand groped around the field's edge and clamped his ankle.

For the first time in his life, Magneto felt a force as inexorable as his own—and it consisted of five blunt fingers squeezing his booted ankle with the unstoppable power of a car crusher. The unfamiliar sensation of a foe actually laying hands on his person was shock enough—but when that crushing grip made his bones crackle and grind, it sent an unfamilar stab of fear into his mutant heart.

But only for an instant.

Magnetic lines of force took hold of the Hulk's hard, metallic fingers, forcing them apart. Snarling, the Hulk squeezed all the harder, forcing beads of sweat to pop from Magneto's helmeted brow.

"You are indeed a foe of unsurpassed malignance," Magneto bit out. "All the more reason that you must die!"

"I will not let go!" the Hulk raged.

"Then hold on to your doom, monster."

Banishing the field on which he stood, Magneto transformed his entire body into a living magnet, using the power of repulsion to send himself shooting high into the burning desert sky.

But the Hulk's unshakeable iron grip refused to surrender.

"You cannot hold on forever, Hulk."

"The Hulk can! The Hulk can do anything you can do!"

Higher and higher climbed Magneto until the landscape below shrank and all detail was lost.

"Once you tire, you must let go. Once you let go, you will die," Magneto warned.

"Hulk will never let go," the behemoth insisted.

"Very well. I will force you."

And the Hulk's fingers, straining to encompass the force field protecting Magneto's ankle, expanded against their will.

In response, the Hulk clamped down. Hard. Magneto redoubled his efforts. Forced to divide his mental efforts, he lost upward momentum.

And the Hulk, all nine hundred pounds of him, began to drag on the master mutant's levitating body. Magneto faltered.

A dangling purple ankle came within reach of a grasping gray fist. And the Hulk struck!

Caught unawares, Magneto let out a short scream of pain as his unprotected ankle experienced the bone-crushing grip of the gamma-spawned monster.

A moment later, they were tumbling out of the sky, mutant and monster, wrapped in a death clutch in which there could be no survivor.

On the way down, the Hulk continually pounded Magneto's colorful form in a mindless, wordless rage, not caring that his blows struck magnetic force lines, only that he was unleashing his unbridled fury on his stunned antagonist.

Thunderbolt Ross took the field glasses down from his eyes. He stood in the open turret of a clanking tank, a walkie-talkie clutched in his free hand. He brought it to his mustached mouth.

"There he is! Open fire!"

A shoulder-fired rocket went careening over his head, launched by an airman crouching behind the tank. Riding a column of sputtering fire, it veered toward the descending tangle of violence.

When the rocket struck, it obscured both foes. The debris fell in a blackish serpent of smoke.

"Direct hit!" Thunderbolt exulted. "We bagged him! We bagged the Hulk! At last!"

The sound of the smoking ball striking the desert floor was more metallic than not.

"Forward!" Ross ordered his men. "I want to see what's left."

The tank column rumbled toward the mushroom cloud of smoke

and debris that lifted over a low sandy rise. Thunderbolt Ross's eyes gleamed with wild, triumphant glee.

Magneto lay on a bed of force, eyes staring skyward. Some instinct for self-preservation had created a magnetic cushion that saved him from breaking every bone in his scarlet-clad body. He shook off the shock of impact and, righting himself, floated over to the sprawled and inert gray mass of unmoving muscle known only as the Hulk.

"You were more powerful than I ever dreamed, Hulk. Still, you were an utter fool to think you could defeat *Homo superior*, you who are less than *Homo sapiens*."

The Hulk did not move. He seemed not to breathe. He lay in an impact crater the size of a small car. Another nearby crater told that he had bounced upon impact.

Stepping down to solid ground, Magneto limped off, his purple cloak in tatters, to a spot where his silver egg of a magnetically-powered craft came to meet him. It opened, accepted him and took off, skimming low where it could not be seen by the advancing tank column.

It wobbled unsteadily, as if injured.

Thunderbolt Ross found the remains of the shoulder-fired missile smoking in the desert floor. There was no sign of the Hulk, nor of Magneto—only an empty impact crater among strewn sandstone rocks.

"Find them!" he roared.

Airmen jumped from their vehicles. They deployed in twos and threes, weapons cocked, not knowing what to expect.

Rick Jones moved among them, low and careful. He had witnessed the entire battle on the televisor, and now he was going to the side of the man who had become a monster because of him.

He found the Hulk in the lee of a boulder, unmoving, seemingly dead. Rick placed an ear to the great barrel chest.

And heard the reassuring beating of a gigantic heart muscle.

"Thank God!" he breathed. "You're alive."

Then, rock in hand, he hunkered down behind a concealing boulder to await discovery.

A pair of nervous airmen approached on booted feet. Crouching, Rick tossed his rock over their heads. It landed beyond them.

"I heard something," one hissed. "Over there!"

And the footsteps went tramping away.

It was as simple as that. Time passed. The forces of Thunderbolt Ross moved on. Dusk came. Darkness fell with the uncanny speed of the desert.

After it seemed safe, Rick came back with a canteen filled with water and poured it down the Hulk's open gullet. The gray behemoth coughed, spat some out, and his eyelids fluttered heavily.

"Hulk. Can you walk?"

"You. Boy. What . . . happened?" the Hulk asked thickly.

"You beat him. You beat Magneto."

"The Hulk cannot be defeated," the man-monster said, forcing himself into an upright position. But a rare twinge of dull pain washed over his wide features.

There, in the gathering night, Rick urged the Hulk to his feet, and led the confused man-monster to the only refuge he had ever known from a hostile world.

Standing the Hulk before the gamma machine, a kneeling Rick manipulated the grid buttons until the powerful warning sounds of the device told him it was time to seek shelter.

The Hulk stood there, unresisting, all but out on his feet.

A flash of green bathed his wavering form. Rick held his breath as the device finished its cycle, then shut down.

"I'm almost afraid to look," he muttered. But look he did.

Bruce Banner, his normal human size and color, lay atop the grid, white and unmoving as death.

Rick went to his side, found him breathing normally, and with great care, carried him back to the room where Banner recuperated from his increasingly-difficult transformations.

For a time, he slept. And in time, he awoke.

After Rick finished making explanations, Bruce Banner replaced

his studious glasses on his face and lay back on the pillow, pale and exhausted.

"Don't worry," Rick assured him. "You're safe, Doc."

"Safe. Yes, safe. For now. But how long are any of us safe as long as we live in the shadow of . . . the Hulk?"

The question hung in the rock chamber, unanswered . . . and unanswerable.

ASSAULT ON AVENGERS MANSION

Richard C. White & Steven A. Roman

Illustration by Louis Small, Jr.

There is a room where evil keeps watch over the world.

It is a special chamber deep beneath the earth, its walls lined with row upon row of television monitors and computer banks. It is a location known to only a few men and women, and they guard its secret with their very lives . . . and those of their families.

Information is processed here, compiled from reports submitted by agents stationed in every major city around the globe. They are the eyes and ears of an individual whom some would say is the personification of evil.

And one day, not too long ago, hate-filled eyes glared at these monitors and intensely watched the movements of a particular group of super heroes. . . .

"Now, *that's* what I call ridin' in style!" the incredible Hulk bellowed as he stepped from the black stretch limousine parked at the curb before Stark Mansion. The car's suspension system seemed to groan with delight as the green behemoth transferred his half-ton weight from the leather back seat to the less resilient concrete sidewalk. "If joining this little sewing circle means having perks like private jets and limos, you can count me in for the long haul."

A roar of transistor-powered jets from overhead caused the Hulk to look skyward. Sunlight glinting off the highly-polished metal of his golden armor, Iron Man made a perfect two-point landing a few feet from the jade giant.

"The Avengers aren't meant to be some stylized glee club, Hulk," Iron Man said sternly. "There are a great number of super-powered men and women popping up around the world these days. Most will use their abilities for the greater good, while others—"

"Are gonna need some sense knocked into 'em," the Hulk interjected. "And that's where we come in." Smiling, he cracked his knuckles. Across the street in Central Park, a flock of pigeons took to the air, apparently frightened by the rifle-like report of popping bones. One pigeon, though, maintained its position on a branch close

to Fifth Avenue, seemingly unaffected by—or uncaring of—the noise. In New York, the occasional fearless pigeon was not out of the ordinary.

Iron Man shook his head. "You just don't get it, do you, lunkhead? We're not enforcers, we're not thugs. The Avengers are meant to be a force for good, to ensure that the world is kept safe from those individuals who would seek to harm others in order to carry out their own selfish goals."

The Hulk frowned and waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "Yeah, yeah, I get it," he barked. "Don't get yer panties in a wad, buckethead. It was meant to be a joke."

Arms folded across his chest, Iron Man huffed sharply. "Then you need to work on your material, big man. Henny Youngman, you're not."

"Maybe not," the Hulk replied, "but I sure know how to deliver a *punchline.*" He stepped forward, massive hands clenching into fists.

The air filled with the sound of transistor-energized armor cycling to full power. "I think you're long overdue for a lesson in humility, fella," Iron Man said. "And I'm more than willing to act as teacher." He moved to meet the Hulk's advance.

"Boys! Boys!" said a lilting, feminine voice from within the limousine. "You promised there'd be no more roughhousing!"

The Hulk and Iron Man stopped in their tracks and turned to face the source of the chastisement.

Iron Man relaxed from his combat-ready pose. "Sorry, Jan," he said apologetically. "Sometimes I get a little hotheaded wearing this tin can."

Resplendent in a red, blue, and black costume, the super heroine known as the Wasp climbed from the vehicle and walked toward her teammates. As wealthy socialite Janet van Dyne, the Wasp was used to being the center of attention, of bringing every man in a room to a screeching halt with one of her grand, sweeping entrances.

Unfortunately, the desired effect was working only too well on one of the Avengers.

The Hulk's eyes narrowed slyly as he gazed at the Wasp—at her high cheekbones and full lips, at the swaying motion of her hips as

she walked, at the way her costume hugged her splendid curves. A lascivious smile slowly crept across his features, and he openly leered at his teammate.

If she was a smart broad, the Hulk thought, *she'd dump that bookworm scientist she hangs around with and latch onto a real man . . . namely,* me. *After all, what's a geek like Pym got that I don't, besides test tubes and Bunsen burners? He's a* loser, *like every other scientific pinhead I've run into.*

For a brief moment, the image of his alter ego, Robert Bruce Banner, swam before the Hulk's eyes. Banner was exactly the kind of man the Hulk hated—intellectual, scrawny . . . weak. He was useless in a fight, no more than a potential victim waiting for a fatal blow to be delivered to end his miserable existence. The Hulk, on the other hand, was power personified—a rampaging, gamma-irradiated dynamo of destruction, feared by the world. He was, quite possibly, the most powerful creature on the planet.

And one day, he considered darkly, the world might learn just *how* powerful he was if it continued to hound him. . . .

Then again, Banner knew what it meant to be admired, respected, even loved. All the Hulk had experienced in his relatively short life since the gamma bomb explosion that spawned him was anger, loathing, and, occasionally, pity. Was it possible that, despite his superior physical strength, the Hulk could be *envious* of the one man he hated more than any other?

Could he actually be *jealous* of Bruce Banner?

Shaking his head to dismiss that train of thought, the Hulk refocused his attention on the Wasp's slender frame. She and Iron Man were making idle conversation, seemingly oblivious to the Hulk's presence. The Hulk wondered if, by pretending to ignore him, they were hoping to calm him down . . . or silently chastise him for trying to start a fight.

The Wasp, catching sight of the Hulk's wolfish expression, came to an abrupt halt in her speech, her smile quickly melting away. She shifted uncomfortably and turned to look back to the limousine.

"Hank . . . ?" she said nervously.

A tall, muscular man stepped out, wearing a costume of the same

hues as the Wasp's. His head was covered by a large, metal helmet, with a stylized microphone centered in front of his mouth—all together, it looked like a futuristic football helmet. In this costume, Dr. Henry Pym was the master of the insect world, using his cybernetic headgear to control entire armies of air-breathing invertebrates. By swallowing a capsule of his own creation, Pym was able to shrink down to the size of an ant. Although the miniaturization process had been invented for scientific purposes, Pym often used this technique to fight crime as the costumed hero known as the astonishing Ant-Man.

More important, though, he was the Wasp's boyfriend.

"Is there a problem, Jan?" Ant-Man asked, clearly concerned.

"Only if you're lookin' to make one, short stuff," the Hulk remarked gruffly. "I was just admirin' how . . . stylish yer girlfriend's tights looked. Guess she's not used to a charmer like me givin' her the once-over." He laughed—a short, barking note.

The Wasp stepped into Ant-Man's comforting arms and shuddered. "Hank," she said softly, "why did you have to invite the Hulk along? He . . . terrifies me."

"Uh, well, honey," Ant-Man replied slowly, "it was *your* idea that we should form a team and continue working together after our run-in with Loki."

It was the machinations of Loki, the Norse god of mischief, that had brought these heroes—plus Thor, god of thunder and Loki's half-brother—together. The jade giant had been used as a scapegoat, accidentally destroying a section of railroad tracks where Loki had projected an image of a bundle of dynamite about to explode. The Hulk had managed to save an oncoming train from derailing, but the damage to the green behemoth's already bad reputation had been done. Iron Man, Ant-Man and the Wasp, and Thor arrived in the southwest soon after, in an effort to subdue the Hulk and bring him to justice.

While Iron Man and his diminutive companions fought the Hulk on the grounds of a traveling circus, the thunder god came to the realization that his half-brother was involved in the melee. Traveling

to Asgard, the home of the Norse gods, he journeyed to the Isle of Silence—a mist-covered realm to which Odin had exiled Loki—where he gained proof that it was the trickster god, and not the Hulk, who was to blame for the destruction. Thor returned to Earth, Loki in tow, to prove to the other heroes that the Hulk was innocent. With the trickster god defeated, it was Ant-Man and the Wasp who suggested the heroes combine their forces and become a team; the Wasp suggested the name "The Avengers."

While the others hopped aboard a Stark International private jet, Thor departed for Asgard to return Loki to the Isle of Silence. Having grown tired of being hounded by the United States military and the growing super hero community, the Hulk declared himself an Avenger and accompanied his erstwhile teammates back to New York. Despite the whispered protests of Ant-Man and the Wasp, Iron Man had pointed out that, regardless of the jade giant's gruff behavior and short temper, it was better to have the Hulk fighting *with* them than *against* them.

It had certainly *seemed* like a good idea at the time. . . .

The Hulk grunted. "Loki," he growled. "If you jokers had given me five minutes alone with him in a room, I could'a guaranteed we'd never have a second run-in with that scrawny pest."

"Thank goodness for cooler heads prevailing, then," Ant-Man commented. "The *last* thing we'd need after completing our first mission is a murder charge hanging over our heads . . . *if* it's at all possible to kill a god."

"Would've been interesting to find out," the Hulk replied. "I owe that runt plenty for all the trouble he caused me." He shrugged. "Another time."

Turning on his heel, he strode toward the front door of Stark Mansion, the other Avengers close behind. Their attention focused on their volatile teammate, the trio of costumed heroes failed to notice the unusually intense stare of the lone pigeon across the street . . . or the fact that the bird's eyes made a peculiar *whirring* sound as they focused on the actions of the colorful quartet.

In New York, mechanical wildlife was also a sight to which the natives were growing accustomed.

Halfway around the world, in the data-gathering room, a shadowy figure sat in front of the monitor that displayed the image transmitted by the robotic bird.

"Intriguing," he murmured, the bass tone of his voice sending waves of tension up the spines of the technicians working around him. "These Avengers are a fragmented group, constantly bickering, constantly at each other's throats." Turning a knob on the control board before him, he narrowed the focus of the televised image, zooming in on the Hulk's savage countenance. "And this green-skinned creature seems to be the weakest link. I have received reports on this 'Hulk' from my agents in the southwest—fast, capable of leaping fantastic distances, incredibly powerful . . . but clearly possessing a troglodytic intellect.

"As a group," he concluded, "the Avengers are no real challenge to one such as I, even with the brute's strength combined with the abilities of his garishly-outfitted compatriots."

He sat back in his chair, chin resting on a gauntleted fist. "Still . . ." he said slowly, "a test of their teamwork—even dysfunctional as it appears to be—may be in order." He turned to his technicians. "Activate the Destructoid. Let us see how well these costumed miscreants stand up to a foe who is *not* a member of their team."

Hurriedly, the technicians moved to carry out the order. Any delay in response would have meant punishment for all of them . . . or death for one, as an example to the rest.

The activation signal was sent . . . and in an underground chamber not found on any maintenance worker's map of New York's Central Park, a receiver tuned to a specific frequency relayed the signal to a hulking, dark mass that stood in one corner of the room.

Electronic eyes glowed a fearsome, blood-red color. Slowly, the dark shape moved across the chamber, heading for a passageway that would lead it to Fifth Avenue . . . and Stark Mansion.

* * *

A few blocks south, the Hulk stood at the entrance to the mansion, Ant-Man and the Wasp standing a discreet distance away, as Iron Man addressed the group.

"My employer, Anthony Stark, realizes that, if the Avengers are to remain a team," he explained, "we're going to need a headquarters of some sort—a place to hang our hats, as it were, between missions. Toward that end, Mr. Stark has given us the unlimited use of his family home." He swept a golden hand toward the stately domicile. "Welcome to Avengers Mansion."

The Hulk huffed. "And where *is* yer boss, tinhead? Aren't you supposed to be his bodyguard?"

"Mr. Stark is away on a business trip," Iron Man replied, "and doesn't require my services right now." The golden Avenger opened the front door with a dramatic flick of his wrist. "After you, Hulk."

The green behemoth paused on the doorstep. "Waitaminnit. Even trackin' around in the middle of the desert out west, I've heard a thing or two about these New York 'old boys' clubs. What kind'a *dues* are you expectin' us to pay?"

"It's all free," Iron Man said. "Room and board, use of the laboratories on the second floor, even the recreation room and indoor swimming pool. All that's required of you is to fight for a good cause."

"So, anyone can just walk in an' be an Avenger?" the Hulk asked.

"We're letting *you* in, aren't we, saladhead?" replied Ant-Man. "Guess that means that, for now, we're willing to lower our standards for membership."

"You know," the Hulk said, glaring at Ant-Man, "I'm startin' to wonder how that fancy hat of yours would look jammed in your—"

"Hank! Look!" the Wasp suddenly cried out. She pointed a gloved hand toward Fifth Avenue.

Stepping over the short, stone boundary wall that enclosed Central Park was a two-story-tall, metallic construct. Though vaguely humanoid in shape—possessing a torso-like trunk and limbs that approximated arms and legs—the creature's head was no more than a small, metallic mound from which a pair of orb-shaped eyes glowed a bright crimson. Its "skin" was a bluish, gunmetal color. A large, circular

panel was built into the creature's chest, and on that panel could be seen a number of metal discs—controls of some sort . . . or coverings for gun ports.

"Holy Hannah!" Ant-Man exclaimed. "What in blazes is *that* thing?"

The Hulk watched the mechanized marauder as it lumbered across Fifth Avenue toward them, causing motorists to bring their vehicles to a swift halt. Brakes squealed, horns blared, and choice invectives—uttered in a half-dozen languages—were hurled at the robot.

The Hulk turned to Ant-Man. "I'd call it a walkin' traffic jam."

Apparently mindless of the traffic nightmare it had created, the oversized android pounded across the asphalt in massive strides. It was clear that it was heading straight for the Avengers.

"Now, it's gonna get interestin'," the Hulk muttered. A savage grin split his lips.

"Spread out, Avengers!" Iron Man ordered. "Don't give it a stationary target. Let me have the first shot at it—my armor should be more than capable of taking whatever this thing can dish out."

As Iron Man moved to one side to draw the android's attention, Ant-Man and the Wasp each swallowed a miniaturization capsule contained in their belts. The effects were instantaneous—the two heroes shrunk down to the sizes of their namesakes. A pair of thin, but powerful, wings sprouted from the Wasp's back as she became smaller.

"I'll try to get us some ground support," Ant-Man said, activating the transmitter of his unique helmet to send out a signal to the insect world. "There must be a colony or twelve of ants somewhere in the area."

"I'll move behind that thing and wait for Iron Man's signal," the Wasp said. "Then, we'll find out how it feels about being stung by a wasp." She took to the air.

"Be careful, Jan!" Ant-Man cautioned. "We have no idea how powerful it might be!"

A few feet away, the Hulk remained standing in the mansion doorway. Arms folded across his barrel chest, he watched as Iron Man launched himself at the robot. The creature met the attack, lashing out

at the armored Avenger with one of its arms. Caught in mid-leap by the blow, Iron Man sailed high into the air and over Fifth Avenue, crashing through trees with a force powerful enough to rattle windows for blocks around.

The Hulk grunted. "Pantywaist." He smiled darkly as he heard Iron Man slam to the ground somewhere in the park. Turning his attention back to the robot, the jade giant's eyes widened at the newest development.

A panel had opened on the creature's shoulder; from it extended a slim, metal rod. It looked like an antenna.

"Helluva time t'be listenin' to a ballgame," the Hulk commented.

On the other side of the world, the robot's master gazed at the monitors around him as technicians worked to translate the coded information being relayed by the robot's antenna.

"As I suspected," the man said, "Iron Man is not an android of inferior design, but rather a buffoon in a suit of armor . . . of inferior design." More information scrolled across the monitors. "As for the diminutive Ant-Man and Wasp, their efforts are almost comical. Pitting mere insects against the robot—sheer madness!"

He turned to look at the video feed provided by the robot pigeon. The camera lenses were still trained on the Hulk, who remained by the front door, picking his teeth with a green-hued fingernail.

"My analysis is confirmed," he said. "The Hulk *is* the weak link in the Avengers' armor, refusing to come to the aid of his compatriots unless, it appears, he is directly threatened." He manipulated controls on the board before him. "We shall see how he responds to *this* threat."

A wave of electrical current arced across the robot's body, and the attack launched by Ant-Man and the Wasp came to a swift end. The Hulk realized that the tiny heroes had probably been knocked out—or possibly even killed—by the powerful charge.

"Shrinkin' down to the size of bugs," the Hulk muttered. "Yeah, that's a *real* useful power."

The mechanized marauder turned and thundered toward the Hulk,

propelled by powerful legs that tore apart the concrete sidewalk with each step. The green-skinned behemoth grinned wickedly and stepped away from the mansion doorway.

"Bring it on, big daddy!" the Hulk bellowed. "When I'm finished with you, there're gonna be a lot of happy scrap metal dealers." He leapt forward to meet his opponent's charge.

Suddenly, a razor-sharp blade sprang from the base of one of the robot's arms. Before the Hulk could evade the weapon, its point had traced a thin line across his chest, drawing green-tinged blood.

The computers in the information-gathering room went wild, spewing out a complex series of biochemical analyses based on the blood sample the Destructoid had drawn from the Hulk.

"Intriguing," the Avengers' enemy murmured. "The Hulk's genetic structure appears to be suffused with gamma radiation. So, *that* is the source of his powers." He pondered this for a moment, then punched a button on the control board. "The manner in which he gained his brutish strength matters not, in the end. I have prepared for every possible form of attack, against any possible costumed cretin. The Hulk *will* fall, as will the rest of the so-called 'super heroes' infesting the world."

The Hulk wiped away the blood that had flowed down his chest; his gamma-irradiated cells had already stopped the bleeding and healed the wound. The jade giant looked up to see a thick, metal tube extend from a port that had opened on the robot's chest.

A brilliant light blazed from the tube, bathing the Hulk in green luminescence. For a moment, the Hulk cocked his head to one side, wondering exactly what the light was meant to do to him.

Then he doubled over, howling in pain.

"Gamma . . . radiation . . ." he hissed through clenched teeth. "Too much. . . ." While it was true that the Hulk gained his prodigious strength from gamma rays, it was also true that prolonged exposure to those same rays could, eventually, kill even him. Every cell in his body felt as though it was being torn apart and put back together . . . incorrectly. Waves of pain swamped his thoughts, threatening to

overwhelm him. But the Hulk fought to remain conscious, forced his body to move, to crawl away from the robot, toward the potential shelter provided by the open mansion door.

The radiation bombardment continued, and the Hulk was growing weaker by the second; he could feel it. He dragged himself closer to the door, then roared as another stab of pain pierced his body and mind. Hazily, he extended a hand toward the open door . . . and froze, as he realized that his hand, even his entire arm, had grown thinner.

The gamma radiation was causing a transformation.

He was changing back to Bruce Banner.

"I have definitely," the Hulk wheezed, "had better days."

Glancing over his shoulder, the Hulk looked up to see his mechanical assailant raise one of its elephantine legs. It was obvious what the robot was going to do next: bring it crashing down on the head of its green-skinned opponent. In his weakened state, the Hulk would not be able to survive the impact.

The leg began its deadly plummet . . . only to be intercepted by a golden blur. Striking the Destructoid in its chest, Iron Man knocked the construct off balance. Its metal appendage slammed into the pavement mere inches from its target. The Hulk silently breathed a sigh of relief.

"Round Two, you walking junkpile," Iron Man said, taunting the machine. The robot turned from the Hulk to focus its attention on the armored Avenger.

Taking advantage of Iron Man's distraction, the Hulk dragged himself into the mansion. With the last of his strength, he rolled behind the heavy, oaken door . . . just as the transformation cycle ended.

Bruce Banner slowly sat up, then peeked around the edge of the open door. Out on the sidewalk, Iron Man was grappling with the robot, neither combatant giving ground as they rained blow after blow on one another. Thousands of ants swarmed over the robot's legs, apparently trying to find an opening in the armored joints. Somewhere among the insects, Bruce realized, Ant-Man must be leading the charge. Despite the Avengers' best efforts, though, their armored enemy remained standing.

This is not good, Bruce thought. *Iron Man might be strong enough*

to go toe-to-toe with that robot, but I doubt he has enough power to outlast *it. Robots never tire . . . but humans certainly do. As for Ant-Man and the Wasp . . . well, Henry Pym might be a brilliant scientist, but it doesn't seem likely that an army of insects is going to cause any harm to a mechanized enemy.*

There's not much I can do, though. That device the robot used on the Hulk is some variation on the gamma ray machine I use to trigger my transformations. Without another dose, I won't be turning into the Hulk anytime soon. Looking down at his thin, pale body, Bruce grinned and shook his head. *Besides, running outside while wearing a pair of purple trunks would be a dead giveaway to the others that there's more—or, rather, less—to the Hulk than meets the eye.*

Turning his attention back to the battle, Bruce's gaze fell on the antenna that rose from the robot's shoulder. The lanky scientist rubbed the edge of his jaw, deep in thought.

Now, why would a robot need an antenna? Unless it's so that whoever sent the robot after us can transmit orders to it. A determined look formed on Bruce's features. *Maybe there* is *something I can do, after all. Iron Man mentioned that there were laboratories in the mansion. If I can find something that could be used to block the signals to the robot. . . .*

Rising to his feet, Bruce ran toward the staircase leading to the second floor.

"Hey, what happened to the Hulk?" Ant-Man asked through the microphone built into his helmet. Sitting astride a flying ant, he was coordinating the multitude of insect warriors that had responded to his signal.

"I saw him going into the mansion," the Wasp replied. "He didn't look well at all."

"Maybe the Hulk's not as tough as he thinks he is," said Iron Man, avoiding the robot's arms as they swung his way. "I had a feeling that green thug would be nothing but trouble."

Triggering the transistor-powered jetstream discs built into the palms of his gauntlets, Iron Man fired twin blasts of compressed air

at the robot's chest. At point-blank range, the discharge succeeded in staggering the robot . . . but the construct remained on its feet.

"I don't know. . . ." the Wasp said hesitantly. Turning in midair, she flew toward the mansion door. "I'm going to see how he is. We're going to need all the help we can get against this robot."

"You do that, Jan," replied Ant-Man. "We'll hold down the fort . . . somehow."

On the second floor of Avengers Mansion, Bruce jogged down a carpeted corridor in search of a laboratory. Clad in black pants and an expensive black silk shirt belonging to Tony Stark—taken from a wardrobe in one of the building's many rooms—Bruce looked more like a scarecrow dressed for a night on the town than a respected scientist. As he moved down the hallway, he made quick checks on each room he came upon.

It might be a good idea, he thought, *for Mr. Stark to provide a map of some sort to the mansion. I'm starting to wonder if I should leave a trail of bread crumbs so I don't become more lost than I already am.*

Turning a corner, Bruce was greeted with the sight of a door marked ELECTRONICS RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT. The knob turned easily, and he stepped inside the room.

The laboratory was a bit of a mess, with tubes and wires and circuitry boards scattered across the tops of a half-dozen Formica worktables. Draped over a number of works-in-progress—devices ranging in size from that of a microwave oven down to that of a child's building block—were design blueprints.

"This looks promising," Bruce muttered. "Now, if I can only find something useful." Since Bruce's background was in nuclear physics, he feared he might be looking at a futuristic toaster, thinking it to be a potential weapon. But he had to try. Whether or not they knew it, his teammates were counting on him.

"Who are you?" demanded a voice from behind him.

Startled, Bruce spun around to find that the Wasp had entered the room. She was back at her full height, and she looked angry.

Bruce raised his hands in a submissive gesture. "I—I don't mean

any harm,'' he stammered. ''I'm Bruce . . . Bruce Berenstein. I'm a . . . friend of the Hulk.''

''Really?'' the Wasp replied, clearly not believing a word he'd said. ''I don't remember the Hulk ever mentioning he had any friends. In fact, I can't even imagine *anyone* considering that brute a friend.''

''Yes, well . . . we all have crosses to bear,'' Bruce said. He slowly lowered his hands and smiled.

Much to his surprise, the Wasp responded in kind, a smile peeping up at the corners of her mouth. She slowly shook her head. ''I can't see why someone like *you* would want to hang around a thug like the Hulk. It's something out of—''

''*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*?''

The Wasp's smile broadened. ''*Beauty and the Beast.*'' There was a gleam in her eye that unsettled Bruce a bit. Was the Wasp actually *flirting* with him, in the middle of a crisis?

Clearing his throat—and turning so the Wasp would be unable to see the embarrassed flush coloring his cheeks—Bruce gestured around the room. ''Well, uh . . . while all of you were fighting that robot, I saw that the front door was open. I came in hoping to find something that could be used against that mechanized marauder.''

''Like what?'' the Wasp asked.

''Well, I noticed an antenna protruding from the robot's shoulder. It's my guess that the person who sent the robot is transmitting instructions to it. What I need is a device that can jam that signal.''

Clearly deep in thought, the Wasp glanced around the room. ''It's hard to say what Tony Stark has in here. For all I know, it's a collection of toasters.'' She moved quickly from one worktable to another, examining each piece of equipment. ''Still . . . helping Ant-Man around his lab has made me familiar enough with electronics to guess that—'' she picked up a small device ''—*this* might be what you're looking for.''

Bruce was nonplussed. ''But . . . how could you know . . . ?''

''Now, Bruce, did you really think I got by on my incredible good looks alone?'' the Wasp said demurely. She picked up a small sheet of blueprint paper that had been laying under the device. ''Besides, it says 'Prototype Signal Blocker' in the bottom lefthand corner.''

"Oh," Bruce said softly. He took the device from the Wasp and examined it closely. It was about the size of a matchbook, with small tines jutting out from its corners. A tiny activation button was built into its underside. "It looks awfully simplistic."

"Not everything has to look complicated to be effective, Bruce," the Wasp replied.

Bruce nodded. "I suppose so."

The mansion rocked from the force of an explosion outside.

"Hank . . ." the Wasp whispered, eyes wide with fear.

"Come on!" Bruce said. He and the Wasp ran for the staircase.

They reached the sidewalk to find Iron Man flat on his back, his armor scorched and pitted. Bruce looked to the robot. Another port had opened on its chest to reveal a formidable-looking weapon; smoke drifted up from its muzzle.

"Where's Ant-Man?" the Wasp asked, an edge to her voice. She turned to Bruce. "I have to find him." Swallowing a miniaturization capsule, she shrank down to insect size and flew off to locate her boyfriend.

Bruce turned his attention back to the robot. It strode toward Iron Man, its weaponry trained on the Golden Avenger's chest.

Bruce looked down at the tiny jammer in his palm. With Ant-Man and the Wasp essentially out of the fight, and the Hulk no longer available, the only person now who could try to stop the metal marauder was a lanky scientist—a scrawny, intelligent, *weak* man, as the Hulk thought of him.

Bruce sighed. "I have *definitely* had better days."

The despot was pleased. What had started as a simple test of the Avengers' abilities had turned into a slaughter. Watching the broadcast transmitted by the robotic pigeon, he sat back and smiled thinly. The Destructoid was now standing over Iron Man, who had yet to rise after being struck by the discharge from the robot's blaster. A second shot would almost certainly kill the armored Avenger.

"The first to fall before my superior might," the robot's master said. He reached toward the control board to send out the signal that

would trigger the blaster and end Iron Man's life . . . only to stop short as a dark shape leapt into the picture to land on the Destructoid's back.

"*What is the meaning of this?*" he bellowed.

Clinging to the robot's shoulders, Bruce pulled himself toward the antenna. The machine, aware of the scientist's presence, spun wildly in an attempt to throw him off. Bruce held on, fighting down the bile he felt rising in his throat, and inched closer to his goal.

"You're not going to get rid of me that easily, friend," Bruce said through gritted teeth. "Not until I've accomplished what I've set out to do . . . no matter *how* suicidal such an act might be."

With a final lunge, Bruce grabbed hold of the antenna with one hand. His other hand dipped into the breast pocket of his shirt, where he had stored the jammer. As his fingers closed over the device, Bruce looked up in time to see the robot raise one of its massive arms. Sunlight gleamed along the serrated edge of the blade that extended from the base of the arm—a blade crusted with dried, green-hued blood.

Bruce pulled the jammer from his pocket.

The blade arced backward, targeted at his skull.

Bruce clamped the jammer to the robot's antenna and flicked the activation switch.

The point of the blade dipped toward the scientist's head . . . and abruptly stopped. The robot stood frozen in place.

The jamming device had worked.

Bruce opened his eyes and gazed upward. The blade had halted mere inches from his scalp. Releasing his grip on the antenna, Bruce dropped to the sidewalk. He exhaled sharply, not realizing until now that he had been holding his breath.

The sound of metal scraping against concrete caught his attention. Looking around the legs of the robot, Bruce saw Iron Man slowly rising to his feet. Coming to his aid were a fully-grown Ant-Man and Wasp.

Turning on his heel, Bruce hurried down the street, to lose himself in the gathering crowd of spectators before the Avengers could talk

to him. The last thing he wanted was to have to answer prying questions about his association with the Hulk.

Bruce smiled. They had come through their ordeal a little worse for wear, but they were all alive. And it was all due to the efforts of a scrawny, "weak" man.

A man who was an Avenger in his own right.

"NO!" roared the armored tyrant, jumping to his feet. "This cannot be!"

A gauntleted fist slammed down on the control board, crushing the panel. Sparks jumped from the damaged circuitry beneath.

"I had planned for every contingency—no costumed meddler on the face of the Earth could have bested my Destructoid." He pointed at the freeze-framed image of Bruce displayed on the main monitor. "To have my plan sabotaged by some *non-entity* is unacceptable!"

He turned to his technicians, who stood frozen with fear. "You will find out who this cretin is—where he lives, who his loved ones are, what weaknesses he possesses. He has much to answer for, and the day will come when he will learn what it means to cross my path . . . just before he dies."

Deep beneath the Earth, in a special room known to only a few men and women, Victor Von Doom, monarch of Latveria, sat and brooded . . . and planned for tomorrow.

PITFALL

Pierce Askegren

Illustration by Andrew Pepoy

Bruce Banner closed the folder and added it to the others piled in front of him. All were bright red, visual shorthand for TOP SECRET. Each bore a label in his neat handwriting: ABSORBATRON, SUNDAY PUNCH, GAMMA GUN, and more. The names were not of his choosing, and born of some bureaucrat's fevered imagination, but he had long since accepted them.

"So Project 34 is a wash," he concluded. "Everything else is on schedule, including the tactical shell tests."

At the other end of the conference table, General Thaddeus "Thunderbolt" Ross puffed a cigar and scowled. "The prototype worked well enough," he said.

"The prototype was a model, a miniature," Banner responded. "Relatively easy to stabilize. Extending the force field area requires power increases on an exponential level. Several exponential levels, actually."

"I understand," Ross said.

Banner knew that he didn't.

Major Glenn Talbot, the base Security Officer, was seated beside Ross. He looked skeptical, but didn't speak. Banner knew that Talbot hated him. Talbot had little patience with cowards or traitors, and he suspected Banner of being both.

"What about the Robot?" Ross asked.

"I wish we could use another name for it," Banner said. "It's not a robot. It's an ambulatory observation bunker, proof against—"

"You work for the Air Force," Ross interrupted. "The Air Force calls it a robot, you call it the Robot. Now, what's the status?"

"The prototype's gone, of course," Banner said. "We never recovered it."

They were talking about an armored suit of his design which someone, identity still unknown, had stolen the month before. Surprisingly, the Robot suit had proven quite effective as a weapon. The man inside it had held his own against the Hulk before ultimately tasting defeat.

That temporary success had generated new interest. Inquires had followed, about building another prototype, customized for tactical use.

"I talked to Stark International," Banner continued. "They can provide us with a replacement chassis, but not for eight months. The titanium laminates are particularly difficult to—"

"That's too long. Could they be dragging their feet?" Talbot asked Ross. "Stark holds many government contracts. I can look into their status, perhaps pull some strings."

Ross nodded. "Do it." He pointed at Banner. "I want a second field test in two months. No excuses. Talbot will take care of Stark."

"Yes, General." Banner spoke with quiet resignation. No one had asked about the wisdom of proceeding. Likely, no one would.

"So much for old business," Ross said. "On to the new." He pushed an intercom button, and another man entered the room. He was remarkably nondescript, with an average build and unmemorable features.

"This is Dr. Wendell Scheer. He's a psychiatrist," Ross said. Scheer extended his hand, and Banner took it. "The Pentagon's got some questions about workplace stress," Ross continued. "The bigwigs are worried about our performance rating." He didn't look as if he agreed.

"I can understand that," Banner said dryly. Recently, the base had seen a sequence of disasters and near-disasters, from equipment sabotage to alien invasions.

"I'll be observing, taking some notes, chatting," Scheer said. Even his voice was nondescript, neutral and almost toneless. "I'll try to keep out of your way."

"*My* way?" Banner repeated. He didn't like the sound of that.

Ross nodded. "Scheer's to pay particular attention to the science staff. And *you.* He'll be observing your work. Make yourself available for personal interviews, too." A curious expression passed over Ross's face, briefly, and Banner realized that he was uncomfortable with what he was saying.

Why? Because he didn't believe in the work of men like Scheer? Or because there was more to the situation than he was telling? Either way, Ross's edict meant trouble.

"That won't be possible," Banner said nervously. His life was complex enough, without an observer underfoot. "I need privacy for my work, and I have a crowded schedule. You can't—"

"We can," Talbot said. "And so can you. The mental and emotional well-being of personnel is of great concern to the Air Force Command." He spoke as if reading from a prepared statement. "The High Command regularly assess the stability of personnel stationed in missile silos across the country. Surely you'll agree that they should pay the same attention to the men who create the missiles?"

Ross looked more uncomfortable now, and Banner realized why. The general, for all his faults, was a direct man who didn't like subterfuge. Besides, Ross wasn't the sort to put much stock in stress analysis or psychotherapy.

There was more to this situation than met the eye. Whose idea had this been? Who would Scheer really report to? The Pentagon, or Talbot?

"But, my work is classified. He can't—"

"Scheer is cleared to your level," Talbot interrupted.

"Besides," Scheer said, "it's not like I'll understand most of what you do." He grinned, suddenly becoming a bit less anonymous. "Come on, Dr. Banner. Play along, and make the best of it. It's not like you have any choice."

Ross nodded. "Orders are orders," he said, so slowly that Banner wondered if the words carried a second meaning. "And you've got yours."

"I appreciate your making time for me, Dr. Banner," Scheer said. Ross's people had found the psychiatrist an office in the Administration Building, and a battered desk. Scheer sat behind it now. He had a notebook in front of him.

"Thank the general," Banner said. "He canceled this morning's tests, though I'm not sure why."

"Thank you all the same. I wanted to talk privately before I started the general phase of my assignment."

Despite the tension he felt, Banner smiled. "Should I be on a couch?" he asked.

Scheer shook his head. "I'm not here to analyze you. That isn't my assignment, and analysis doesn't work that way." He paused. "Look, the only way this is going to work is if you're honest with me, and the only way that even might happen is if *I'm* honest with you."

Banner didn't respond.

"My job is to assess emotional and mental stability in general, but my *orders* are to focus specifically on you. Not exclusively, but to the greatest extent possible. There have been complaints, reports—"

"I can guess who made them," Banner said.

"Their origin doesn't concern me; their contents do. You've been prone to disappearances without explanation. Hardly good behavior at a military facility. There have been reports of torn clothing and moodiness. Erratic behavior. Test schedules are slipping—"

"I don't do badly," Banner said. Anger, a too-frequent companion these days, welled up within him. With effort, he fought it down, and made himself sound merely testy. "You try juggling ten developmental programs at once, and you might be surprised at how well I do."

"Probably," Scheer said. "But you were doing better before the gamma bomb incident."

Banner flinched, an image of his other half, his darker face, flashing through his mind.

The Hulk.

"You may not believe it," Scheer continued, "but I'm here to help. I'm not working against you. I'm not Ross, I'm not Talbot—"

"You're talking as if I were paranoid," Banner said, irritated. "Those men may not be my friends, but they're certainly not my enemies. The general is my boss, and my girlfriend's father. That's enough freight for any one man. And Talbot's not so bad. He's just trying to do his job."

"And he's also, obviously, interested in the general's daughter."

Banner thought of Betty Ross, of delicate features framed by auburn locks, and a girlish demeanor that hid a steely strength. "Can't say as I blame him," he said. "Who wouldn't be attracted to Betty?"

"That's a remarkable assessment. Very detached for someone in your position," Scheer said. "Almost too detached."

"What do you mean?"

"I know Ross is no fun to work for," Scheer said. "I also know how Talbot feels less kindly about you than your assessment of him. It seems to me that you have ample justification to voice resentment. The fact that you don't is troubling."

"I've got bigger things on my mind," Banner said. "I don't have time for that."

"Emotions have a purpose, Dr. Banner. The 'bad' ones as well as the 'good.' You won't get anywhere denying them."

Banner almost laughed. Scheer had no idea that Banner's current existence, precarious as it was, depended on denying certain emotions. Anger, hatred, fear—any of them could trigger the change and turn him into the Hulk.

"Can we talk about this some other time?" Banner asked. "I've got work to do."

Scheer nodded. "Fair enough," he said. "I'd like to watch—"

The phone rang, and Scheer answered it. He sighed as he returned the receiver to its cradle. "Speak of the devil, and he answers. That was Talbot. He wants to see you in his office. Now."

Banner stood. "Until later, then," he said. He had a feeling he was about to find out why the morning test run had been canceled.

Scheer nodded, but remained silent. The only sound he made was the scratching of his pencil as it moved along one page of the open notebook.

As he exited the office, Banner wondered what Scheer was writing.

"Where were you last night, Banner?" Talbot asked. His office was on the ground floor of the Administration Building, near Ross's. Banner had been interviewed there before and knew the place well. One door led to a secured file room; the other, which Banner had passed through only a minute before, led to the hallway.

"I went into town," Banner said. He spoke carefully. Talbot was a skilled interrogator, and often reinforced his keen memory with concealed tape recorders. "I had to buy some pants." Banner gestured at his purplish trousers. "These were all they had in my size."

Talbot shook his head. "Later than that. You left the base at 0700,

came back at 1030 hours. I want to know what you were doing later, after midnight.''

''Sleeping, mostly. I read a little.''

''You didn't leave your quarters after midnight?''

''No, of course not,'' Banner said. ''And if I had, I'm sure one of your men would have spotted me.''

''True enough,'' Talbot said curtly. ''Deeley said you hadn't left all night. But you've slipped past sentries and guards before.''

''Never deliberately,'' Banner said. ''Let's make a deal. You tell me when I'm under surveillance, and I'll keep your watchdogs posted on my whereabouts.''

Talbot's response was a glare. He had long since made his suspicions about Banner excruciatingly clear. As far as Talbot was concerned, Banner knew, the scientist was at best unreliable, and at worst, a traitor. Even more troubling, Talbot was good enough to suspect a connection between Banner and the Hulk, though he had no idea what that connection was. Talbot had already tried to revoke Banner's security clearance. Only the lack of solid evidence and the fact that the scientist's skills were very nearly irreplaceable had kept him working.

''Do you want to tell me what this is all about?'' Banner asked.

''I was hoping you could do that,'' Talbot said. ''But that would be doing things the easy way, right?''

Banner didn't say anything.

Talbot handed him a photograph. It showed a twisted mass of shattered metal, thick armor torn to ribbons by some incredible force. The destruction was so complete that Banner took nearly a minute to recognize what the pieces of wreckage had been. With effort, he could make out a shattered gun turret, and segments of tractor treads—all that remained of a Sherman tank. Worse, Banner realized it was a specific Sherman tank, one he had worked on himself.

''So that's why Ross canceled the morning test runs,'' he said, his heart racing. ''What happened?''

''At approximately 0400 this morning,'' Talbot said, ''someone or something tore through the perimeter and made its way to the prototype holding area. Once there, it made short work of the Gamma Tank prototype and made off with two armed shells.''

That was bad, very bad. The shells in question were artillery versions of the gamma bomb, and represented the next generation of weapons technology.

"Any idea who did it?" Banner asked. He had a sick idea of what Talbot's response would be.

"The work is consistent with the Hulk's," Talbot said. "We don't have any proof yet, but we will."

"The Hulk's been wrongly suspected before," Banner said slowly. "That was before your time, though." Some months before, a foreign agent had earned the title of the Wrecker by destroying several project prototypes. His handiwork had been devastating enough that it had been blamed on the Hulk. That incident had been one of several spurring Talbot's assignment to the base.

"Why do you defend him, Banner?" Talbot said. "What's your connection with that monster? He's been implicated in at least a dozen major incidents. He's wrecked every weapon we've thrown against him, he's committed millions of dollars worth of property damage, he's rampaged in some of the nation's most populous cities, including New York." Talbot handed Banner another photograph. "And now he's killed."

"Killed?" Banner looked at the picture. It showed the body of a uniformed man, with open, sightless eyes that bulged from their sockets. His features were suffused with blood, and his head rested at an unnatural, impossible angle.

"That is—*was* Private Alan Rodgers," Talbot said. "He was on patrol last night, when the Hulk pulled off his raid."

His words cut through Banner's growing sense of agitation. The scientist knew that the Hulk hadn't committed the crime, that he couldn't have committed the crime; the Hulk was Bruce Banner, and he wasn't a killer. Besides, Bruce Banner had been home in bed the entire night.

Hadn't he?

He thought of sleepwalking and then pushed the thought away, desperately. He knew a bit about somnambulism, and the kinds of stress that could create it. A sleepwalking Hulk, motivated by some

incomprehensible primal instinct—that idea was too dreadful to consider, especially in the absence of any evidence.

"What about the surveillance cameras?" he asked. "Witnesses?"

Talbot shook his head. "The cameras were wrecked, too."

"That doesn't sound like the Hulk. Neither does the murder," Banner said, his mind still racing. There were other factors to consider. Two gamma shells, armed and activated, were missing. Either could cause massive destruction, or worse. A single accident involving gamma radiation had created the Hulk. That had been some kind of freak circumstance, a massive fluke.

But what had happened once could happen again.

"We have a witness, though," Talbot continued. "The other sentry, Private Hart. He gave a description of something big and humanoid, like the Hulk."

"How good a witness is he?" Banner asked the question eagerly, hoping to find an inconsistency, however minor, that would throw suspicion anywhere else.

Talbot's response was a look of disgust. "You sicken me, Banner," he snapped. "A good man lies dead, and all you want to do is cast aspersions on his partner. It's people like Rodgers and Hart who make the world safe for eggheads like you. If you ask me, you aren't worthy to shine their shoes."

"I don't recall asking you," Banner said. With effort, he reined in his emotions, forcing himself to speak in measured, even calm tones. "What is it you want from me, Talbot? I've answered your questions, like I always do. You want to bring me up on charges, go ahead. Otherwise, let me get back to my work."

"So, you've got a bit of a spine, after all. That's a surprise," Talbot said. "Okay. Go play with your test tubes, Banner. But stay available. I'm keeping an eye on you."

The next days were hectic and unpleasant for Bruce Banner. His regular duties were enough to keep him busy under any circumstances, but now, he had to make time for both Talbot and Scheer.

Daily, Banner's phone would ring. Daily, he would drop all work and report to Talbot. There, for ten minutes, or fifteen, or twenty, he

would respond to relentless questions, as Talbot sought to assign Banner some portion of blame for the theft of the prototype shells. Banner would answer the questions as best he could, which usually took the form of professing his honest ignorance of just what had happened. After each session, Banner would return to his lab and pick up where he had left off, nervously awaiting the next call.

Scheer was different. He was an unknown quantity, one that Banner had begun to think was unknowable. Colorless and quiet, the psychiatrist insinuated himself into the base's daily routine and blended like a chameleon into the environment. More than once, thinking he was alone, Banner looked up from a test sequence to find Scheer silently observing his every movement. It was unnerving. Banner liked solitude and prided himself on being observant, two qualities useful for a man with such a big secret to hide. Now, he had to wonder if he had inadvertently given Scheer any clues about his double life, and also wonder how good Scheer was at piecing such clues together. Finally, during a private session, he raised the subject.

"What do you think of us so far?" he asked.

"The base? It's an insulated community," Scheer replied. "Too insulated. General morale is reasonably good, considering the circumstances. You, however. . . ."

Banner looked at him.

Scheer closed his notebook. "You strike me as a profoundly conflicted individual, Dr. Banner. I'd like very much to know more about your childhood."

Banner tensed. "I thought you weren't here to analyze me."

"I'm not. I'm making an observation. If you'd rather I didn't, say so."

Banner didn't.

"I've read your files, you know. All of them."

"Talbot must trust you," Banner replied.

"Not at all. I've told you before, I don't work for Talbot. He pulled strings to get me here, but he's not my boss." Scheer smiled thinly. "He's finding that out the hard way."

"Oh." Banner abruptly realized that Scheer's nondescript demeanor probably masked considerable inner strength.

"Be that as it may, I know you risked your life to save a civilian intruder," Scheer continued. "I know how much radiation you absorbed, and I know that your survival is still a medical mystery."

Banner thought about that night, as he often did. He thought about an impudent teenager in a beat-up jalopy, and about an explosion that had turned night into day. He thought about the shock wave and the thunder, and his own screams—screams that had continued well into morning.

He thought about the Hulk.

"That was a fluke," he said.

"Most men, after an experience like that, would take time off, maybe reassess their lives. You didn't. You buried yourself in your work."

"My country needs me, needs the work I do," Banner said.

Scheer nodded. "And I think you need it, too."

Banner flinched, stung by the words. To have any hope of curing himself of the Hulk, he needed access to a fully equipped nuclear facility. "The Air Force funds what I do," he said slowly.

"There's more to it than that, I think," Scheer said.

Banner stared at him, at Scheer's suddenly penetrating gaze. Words came to his lips, unbidden. "I'm loyal," he said softly, without knowing why he spoke.

"I never said you weren't," Scheer said. "I think you've got problems, though, ones you won't resolve on your own."

"Such as?"

Scheer shrugged. "Survivor's guilt, for one. You lived though an atomic explosion; hundreds of thousands in Hiroshima and Nagasaki didn't."

"Those were different circumstances," Banner said hotly. "And this is a different bomb!"

"That was just an example," Scheer replied. "But consider—you're willing to risk your life to save an utter stranger, but you spend your days refining the very device that endangered him. You're loyal to your nation, certainly—but you obviously want to be loyal to your species. That's a rather basic conflict, hard to resolve."

"You don't understand."

"Don't I?" Scheer asked. "I'm a doctor, an M.D. I've taken the Hippocratic Oath. 'Do No Harm.' But I'm a military psychiatrist, and much of my work is to make men ready to kill other men."

Banner looked at him, suddenly sympathetic.

"How?" he asked. "How do you resolve a conflict like that?"

"Sometimes you don't," Scheer said. "But you can manage it, strike a balance. You have to." He looked bleak for a moment, and then the mask of anonymity settled back into place as he resumed his questions.

The base was flanked on one side by foothills—the first rough outcroppings of the local mountain range. The Robot hugged their shadows for as long as possible before traversing the sandy expanse between them and the main perimeter. The noon sun beat down with relentless intensity, and lit him in its glare. Against the white sand and blue sky, the intruder's red metal contours were impossible to miss and easily recognized. Before he had taken a dozen steps, some sentry sounded the alarm—a harsh, shrieking wail that split the air. A moment after that, the first shots were fired.

The Robot didn't care.

Bullets meant nothing to the man inside the mechanical suit. Bruce Banner's designs had made the Robot nearly indestructible. The Robot knew that he was immune to anything the soldiers could use against him.

The reverse wasn't true, of course.

More bullets smashed into the Robot as he moved forward. An elevated guard post was in his path, so he paused to topple it, driving one fist into a support member. He paid little attention to the tower as it fell, nor to the hailstorm of small- and medium-arms fire that raged about him as soldiers mobilized in defense of their base. A bazooka shell slammed into him, exploded. He ignored it.

Other matters demanded his attention.

The suit made him nearly invulnerable. Since stealing it, he had survived a low-yield nuclear blast, hand-to-hand combat with the Hulk, and a fall into a nearly bottomless pit. The armor's only drawback was a function of its mass; many tons in weight, it moved slowly.

Though tireless and unstoppable, the Robot was easily followed, and avoiding pursuit was difficult.

The man inside the mechanical menace smiled again. He could change that situation easily enough.

As he approached the motor pool area, a jeep roared at him, its hood-mounted machine gun spitting lead. The driver gunned the engine and threw himself from the vehicle and his partner followed suit, so that it was an empty jeep that slammed into the Robot in a futile attempt to stop his progress. The armored man kicked the wreckage aside and kept walking.

The motor pool area was near the helicopter launch pad, and both were near the above-ground fuel reserves. It was an efficient layout, but a vulnerable one. The Robot approached a fuel tank and dug one steel claw deep into it, then peeled back the metal skin. Gasoline gushed out and splashed onto the tarmac. In seconds, the highly flammable liquid was inches deep beneath parked transports and helicopters.

The Robot drew a flare gun.

Area personnel gave frightened yells and ran.

The man inside the Robot scarcely noticed. He fired a flare into the gasoline pooled at his feet, then started moving again, even as the world around him turned into thunder and flames.

Banner was leaving Scheer's office when he heard the alarm sirens—and then the explosion. In seconds, the Administration Building's halls were crowded with frightened staff; officers barked angry orders.

Scheer came out of his office and joined the throng of evacuees. From the corner of one eye, Banner saw Talbot look in his direction, but he had no time for the Security Officer now. The blood was pounding in the lanky scientist's temples like a jackhammer. Talbot's constant suspicion, Scheer's unnerving observations, the explosion and the sirens, and now the human herd stampeding through the narrow corridor—all these had been enough to raise Banner's stress and pulse rate to threshold levels. He tried to fight them back down, but to no avail. Banner knew with a sick certainty that he was seconds

away from becoming the Hulk. Desperately, he dodged Scheer and Talbot both. An empty workroom beckoned; he threw himself into it, slammed the door.

He was just in time, he realized. No one would see it happen. Then the thought faded, swept aside by a tide of unreasoning anger that built upon itself.

Muscles grew, doubling and tripling in size. Bones reshaped themselves, as delicate features gave way to a more brutish countenance. Eyes receded as the brow that sheltered them grew outward. Arms and legs lengthened, and the muscles grew more to keep pace with them. Clothes split and fell away. Skin thickened and coarsened, and its color changed, too, as a fair complexion became emerald green.

"No," Bruce Banner said softly, in futile denial.

"Yes!" the Hulk replied exultantly. "Yes!"

Then he looked around for something to smash.

No one tried to stop the Robot as he went about his business. Most personnel were either fleeing the holocaust in the fuel reserves, or working to douse it. Either way, they were too busy to deal with him now.

He smashed through the Administration Building's outer wall and went inside. Before stealing the metal suit, the man had worked here as an undercover spy, so he knew the precise location of his objective. He lumbered toward Talbot's office and tore the reinforced door from the file room, then went to work on the locked cabinets inside.

Then the Hulk stepped into the room and punched him in the head.

"Not yours!" the behemoth roared.

Staggered but not toppled, the Robot regained his balance. "Hulk?" he said. "What are *you* doing here?"

"No questions!" the Hulk bellowed, and hit the Robot again. "Answers!" The Hulk's memories were not Bruce Banner's, but some part of his muddled consciousness recognized the folders the Robot held, and knew that they were important.

"Oh, be quiet," the Robot said. "You can't hurt me."

Doing his best to prove the contrary, the Hulk drove both fists into the Robot's abdomen. Braced, the Robot scarcely seemed to notice.

"How did you get here?" the Hulk demanded. A month before, they had battled in the nearby mountains. Now, his chaotic memory played back a single image. "You went down a bottomless pit!"

"There's no such thing as a bottomless pit," the Robot said, clearly annoyed by the Hulk's stupidity. The suit the man wore had protected him from his fall, but it had taken weeks to claw his way back to the surface. "Go away, now," he said, as though addressing a disobedient child. "I don't have time for you."

"Make the time!" the monster snarled. He grinned as he renewed his assault. It wasn't often that the Hulk found something worth pummeling.

"I don't think so." The Robot retracted his hand assemblies, making his arms blunt clubs. He slammed them against his attacker's skull. The Hulk howled in response, so the Robot hit him again. The first blow had obviously pained the monster, but the second one didn't seem to.

The Robot found that development troubling.

"Hah!" the Hulk said. "You'll have to hit harder than that! Like this!" He drew back one fist and brought it forward again.

This time, the force sent the Robot smashing through the structure's walls.

The Hulk followed.

Sprawled on the ground outside, the Robot looked up, astonished. It didn't seem possible. He had actually fallen. "I don't believe it!" he exclaimed. "You're getting stronger!"

"Madder!" the Hulk corrected. He smashed a fist against the Robot's face plate.

Inside the Robot, an alarm buzzed. The man wearing the suit suddenly felt nervous. Apparently, Banner's invention had its limits, after all; equally apparently, the Hulk did not.

It was time for the trump card.

A compartment on the Robot's chest opened. Bruce Banner had intended the space for a quark enumerator, but the Robot had found another use for it. Something popped out and fell to the ground.

It was the size and diameter of an artillery shell. It was a dozen

pounds of isotopes and circuitry. It was the latest fruit of Bruce Banner's genius.

It was a tactical shell based on gamma bomb technology.

It was death.

The Hulk recognized it instantly. The knowledge came to him with crystal clarity, unobscured by his usual fog of rage and confusion. He knew what it was, even if he didn't know how he knew.

He knew the danger.

The Hulk threw himself on the bomb even as the device exploded. Heat and light and thunder erupted from it, muffled by the Hulk's body—but something else was released by the blast, as well. Gamma radiation spilled forth, enough to kill countless scores of normal men.

It wasn't enough to kill the Hulk.

Long seconds after the blast, he lurched to his feet, and looked around. The Robot was already lost to sight, but that didn't matter. What did matter was the familiar sensation sweeping through him.

"No," the Hulk muttered. "No! I mustn't become the puny Banner again!"

He didn't have any choice. Once again, muscles and bone flowed and reshaped themselves, but dwindling this time, fading away into nothingness. In seconds, the Hulk was gone, replaced by the smaller, weaker form of Bruce Banner.

After the world had stopped spinning around him, Banner stumbled from the blast site and hurried to his lab. No one encountered him on the way, which was a relief, because his current outfit—torn pants, no shoes, no shirt—would take some explaining. At the lab, he donned spare clothes he kept there for such occasions. His mind was racing.

That the Robot had somehow returned was bad enough. That he had killed a man and purloined two Gamma shells was infinitely worse. The Robot was both a spy and a saboteur, and had tried before to destroy the base. With the remaining shell, he might accomplish that goal—and next time he tried, the Hulk might not be available to stop him.

Or might choose not to, Banner realized grimly. His other self was anything but predictable.

This entire situation was literally of his own making, he realized.

He had designed the Robot and the bombs, and his own alter ego had twice failed to stop their thief. The Robot had to be found, and fast. The marauder had to be stopped, but Banner knew that there was no chance Talbot would let him help in the search.

The utility closet yielded tools and a walkie-talkie. He grabbed them, and an electronic scanner like the one he had used before to track the Robot. Perhaps where the Hulk had failed, Bruce Banner could succeed. If he could find the Robot's lair, perhaps disarm the shell—

If.

After a mile or so, the rough foothills gave way to even craggier weathered rock, marked by crags and crevasses. Banner knew these mountains well. Despite his slight build, he was an accomplished hiker who had spent countless hours exploring them, ferreting out the secrets even as he worked to hide his own. A dozen local caves held caches of clothing, food and equipment, hidden there against the day he would need them. He suspected he would find something else in the area, too.

The previous month, the Hulk had battled the Robot in this maze of sun-bleached rock. The armored man had hidden himself here as he struck at the base, using a missile improvised from Banner's own equipment. Now, logic told Banner that the Robot had almost certainly returned to this lonely locale. There was nowhere else that the saboteur could hide, no other reasonable base for his operations.

The scanner Banner held confirmed his theory. He had configured it to detect and track the Robot's unique energy signature. Now, as he trudged along a mountain trail, the device chirped softly.

Banner examined the display. The reading was there, but too weak to make a directional fix. He pressed a button and changed the gadget's settings. Tuned now to detect gamma radiation, the new display presented two loci. One was him; the tissues of his body hid reserves of that energy. The other was presumably the remaining gamma shell. If he could correlate that with the Robot's trace—

"What is that?" someone asked.

Banner looked up in surprise.

Wendell Scheer stepped out from behind a rock. "I asked you what that is," the psychiatrist repeated, in a tone somewhat different from his typical patient, probing one. He looked tired and dirty, and obviously annoyed.

"What are you doing here?" Banner demanded. "Did Talbot set you on me?"

Scheer shook his head. "I keep telling you, I don't work for Talbot," he said testily. "But I'm beginning to feel some sympathy for him. You score very high in the 'erratic behavior' category, Dr. Banner. A man less patient than I might view your actions with greater suspicion."

Questions raced through Banner's mind, but he voiced none of them. What was he going to do now? How much did Scheer know? Why had the psychiatrist followed him?

"I saw you back at the base," Scheer said. He sat and mopped his forehead. "Saw you run back to the lab, your clothes torn. So I followed you."

Banner's heart skipped a beat. What else had the doctor seen? Scheer was smart, observant, and a skilled interviewer. More than once in private sessions, Banner had found himself telling the psychiatrist things he ordinarily kept secret.

How much did Scheer know? How much had he deduced?

"I could have called Talbot, but I didn't want to. I still don't. But there are too many questions," Scheer said. "Talbot's questions. Mine."

Banner's heart beat faster now. A feeling of hopelessness washed over him.

"The Robot started the fire," Scheer said. "You built the Robot. I know that."

Banner looked at him. Ordinarily, such comments brought a glib rejoinder—but now, he couldn't think of one.

It was getting harder to think at all.

"The Hulk was sighted, too," Scheer continued, "and I know Talbot thinks there's a connection between you and that monster. I think so, too."

"You—you've got to go back," Banner said. He licked his lips,

swallowed, tried to think peaceful thoughts. It was no use. He could feel the change coming, too strong to be denied. "Back to the base. Please. Leave me here."

Something in Banner's tones gave Scheer pause. "What is it, man? What's wrong?"

Banner's breath came in short gasps now, hard to shape into words. "You've got to go back," he repeated, more forcefully this time.

The need to keep his own secret and his concern for Scheer's safety struck at him like twin hammer blows. His clothes and shirt suddenly felt tight, and a glance at his fingertips showed a greenish tinge. Banner dropped the scanner, clutched his throat.

"Just leave me!" he begged. "Go!"

The scanner hit the rocks. It gave a warning chirp, but neither man noticed.

Scheer stepped closer. "What is it?" he repeated. "A seizure?"

Banner could barely make sense of his words. Every iota of his will was focused on stalling the change, forcing the Hulk back another minute, another second—

A grating noise suddenly sounded, loud and ominous. The noise that metal boots made as they dragged along rock.

Banner and Scheer looked up. Something huge lumbered into view, something red and metallic and only vaguely humanoid.

"The Robot?" Banner heard Scheer whisper.

Suddenly, turning into the Hulk didn't seem like such a bad idea.

Then one metal limb lashed out, and darkness fell.

"—make you talk!" The words echoed hollowly, but their timbre was menacing.

Consciousness returned to Bruce Banner and brought with it nausea, a headache, and scraps of overheard, angry demands.

"I don't know anything, I tell you," came the reply. That was Scheer.

Banner opened his eyes a bit, and winced as the pounding pain in his head increased. Slowly, reality swam back into focus.

He was in a cave, one he recognized. Once, he had used it as an equipment cache. The Hulk's previous battle with the Robot had cli-

maxed here, and, although the Hulk's memories were not Banner's, the scientist knew that it had ended rather conclusively. A single image welled up from the recesses of his mind—the Robot, tumbling down a shadowed pit at the cave's center.

He could see that pit now. The Robot stood on the other side of it.

"Talk, blast you!" the Robot bellowed. His back was to Banner, blocking the scientist's view of Scheer. Neither had realized yet that Banner was awake. "Who are you?"

Scheer didn't reply.

"Bah! I don't need you! I have the man! I have his work! My Leader will reward me well for both!" the Robot crowed.

Banner looked around. A neat bundle of bright red file folders rested on one rocky ledge. He knew what they had to be—his own reports and schematics for highly classified weapons systems. Next to them was something else he recognized.

The second warhead.

"You can't do this!" Scheer pleaded.

The Robot lifted his captive and turned. Banner could see Scheer now. Bruised, bleeding, the man had obviously been beaten. Banner watched through barely open eyes as the Robot trudged toward the pit that yawned at the cave's center.

Banner's pulse raced. Suddenly, his headache seemed a bit less painful, and his bonds became a bit tighter. His eyes opened wider.

Sometimes he knew what was coming. Sometimes he could prepare. There was no chance to save his clothes, but maybe—

He kicked off his shoes. They wouldn't fit the Hulk, but Bruce Banner would need them later.

The Robot lifted Scheer. "Enough of this," the armored saboteur said. "I'm done with you!"

Scheer struggled in the iron grasp, and managed to kick the Robot's steel skull.

The Robot laughed. "Think you'll succeed where the Hulk failed? Fool!"

Scheer, still struggling, looked around frantically.

Scheer's gaze caught Banner's—met it and locked.

The psychiatrist's eyes opened wide, as fear was displaced by a look of realization . . . or, perhaps, understanding.

The Robot held Scheer above the depths. "Let's see if *you* can climb out of here," he said.

The ropes holding Banner bit deep into wrists suddenly too large for them, then broke and fell away.

Scheer fainted.

The Hulk threw himself at the Robot.

He slammed into the Robot's back, just above the mid-section, and sent him skidding back from the pit's lip. As the Robot tumbled backwards, he dropped Scheer. The unconscious man fell to the cave floor, a safe distance from the chasm.

"The Hulk!? You're still alive? How did you get here?" the Robot demanded. He sounded almost querulous. "Why must you always interfere?"

"No talk," the Hulk responded. "Fight!" He punched the Robot again and again.

The Robot struggled to his feet. The suit he wore included gyroscopic stabilizers; once he was upright, they kept him that way.

"I've had enough of you, Hulk," he said, digging the pincers of his right hand deep into his assailant's throat. Achieving a good grip, he dragged the Hulk along the cave's floor.

The Hulk made a gurgling noise, and dug at the steel fingers. Impossibly, the metal was too tough for even the Hulk to bend back—but the servomotors that drove the pincers were less durable. With a whine of protest, the claws popped open. Freed from the steely grip, the Hulk prepared for another charge.

"Too late, Hulk," the Robot said. "I've got what I need." His other hand assembly closed around the second gamma shell.

The Hulk growled.

"You recognize it, don't you?" the Robot asked. "Even your stupid, brutish brain knows what this is."

Fear rippled through the Hulk's mind. He remembered the explosion of only hours before, the fire and the thunder and the searing pain.

He remembered becoming Banner.

"I don't know how you survived the first blast, Hulk," the Robot continued. "But yield, or we'll find if you can survive the second."

The Hulk stared at him, unmoving.

"Hah!" the Robot said. "The strongest creature on earth, ready to obey my every order!" He laughed again. "On your knees, Hulk!"

Instead of obeying, the Hulk made his hands into fists and brought them down, fast and hard, against the cave floor. The ancient rock rippled and shook.

"No!" the Robot said. The shock wave hit him. He stumbled, then fell, still holding the bomb.

As the Robot fell, the Hulk rose. "Yes!" he roared.

The Robot kicked at him, but the Hulk kicked back. The Robot skidded and slid away skating over the pit's edge. At the last instant, he groped desperately and found purchase with the steel fingers of his free hand. They dug deep into the rock and kept him from falling.

"No," the Robot said. Only his head and shoulders were visible above the pit. "Please, not again. I surrender."

The Hulk stepped closer.

"Please, don't let me fall. I don't want to fall down there again. Please, don't let me fall," the Robot pleaded. "I surrender, Hulk. I yield."

Something in his words struck a chord buried deeply in the Hulk's turbulent consciousness. His lips shaped the words, but it was some aspect of Bruce Banner who spoke. "I won't let you fall," he said, extending one hand.

The Robot's other hand came up from the shadows. It still held the bomb.

He struck the Hulk over the head with the metal cylinder's side, well away from its detonator, striking hard enough to break even the Hulk's skin. The Hulk roared, more out of anger than pain. Bright green blood trickled down his bestial features.

The Robot laughed triumphantly. He set the bomb carefully on the pit's edge, then began pulling himself from the brink.

"I'll win this time, Hulk," he said. "History won't repeat itself."

As he climbed, the rock of the pit's edge crumbled. Already weakened by the Hulk's blow, damaged further by the Robot's claws, it

broke along spider-webbed cracks that spread and intersected, and then spread some more. The rock shattered into great, ragged chunks that offered no purchase to the Robot's desperate grip. The man inside the armor gave a howl of terror.

Not knowing why, still motivated by some shred of Bruce Banner's compassion, the Hulk reached out again to help, but it was too late. He watched helplessly as the Robot fell backward and down.

The bomb fell, too.

The Robot's shriek of terror echoed up from the depths for long moments, only to be drowned out by the gamma shell's detonation.

Caught and shaped by the pit's walls, the blast roared upward in a vertical shaft of light and heat and radiation. The beam's incandescent fringes caught the Hulk and bathed him in their radiance.

By the time the explosion's last echo had faded, the Hulk no longer stood at the pit's brink.

Bruce Banner did.

''—used the walkie-talkie to call help. That's about all,'' Scheer concluded. He looked less nondescript today. Bruises and bandages marked his bland features.

''No, it's not,'' Talbot said. They were in the office previously assigned to Scheer, but it was Talbot's now, at least until his spaces were repaired. ''I want to know why you followed Banner—''

''Because I saw him leave and couldn't find anyone else to do the job. Everyone was busy at the fire.''

''—and I want to know why Banner followed the Robot.''

''Because he saw the Robot leave, and couldn't find anyone else to do the job.''

''That's what Banner says,'' Talbot responded. ''I might believe you. I don't believe *him.*''

The past few days had been frustrating for the Security Officer, and he knew they would not look good on his record. There was the return of the Robot, the holocaust at the fuel reserves, and extensive damage to the facility. Files and weapons had been stolen, and only the files had been recovered. The prototype Robot suit was apparently lost again. Even worse, the Hulk had once more involved himself in a

major security breach, then evaded capture. Talbot didn't like to think about how many times that had happened.

"What about the Hulk?" he asked. "Reports are, he showed up, fought the Robot, beat him."

Scheer shrugged. "If he did, it was while I was unconscious. Talk to Banner."

"I have," Talbot said. "I will. Tell me, just what do you think of our chief scientist?"

"He's tougher than he looks, for one thing," Scheer said. "I could barely keep up with him on those trails."

"That's not what I mean. I'm talking professionally. You must have some idea of what makes him tick. Tell me."

"I haven't written my report yet, Major," Scheer said, "and when I do, it won't be addressed to you. If our superiors decide you need to know what's in it, you will."

Talbot glared at him.

The psychiatrist relented. "But I can give you some general comments on the base as a whole. I'm amazed any of you can function at all. Bad enough that you're so isolated, an hour from town. Bad enough that you've got such tight schedules and such high-pressure projects. In the last year or so, this installation has seen sabotage, attacks by monsters, and even an alien invasion."

"Most of that was before my time," Talbot said stiffly.

"Oh, it's not an accusation, Major. I'm sure you do your job well. That's a minor miracle, all by itself." Scheer grinned. "I can't imagine a position I'd less rather have. I've been here a week, and I got abducted by a giant robot hell-bent on stealing America's secrets. Nothing like that's ever happened to me before—but for you folks, it's business as usual. No wonder performance ratings have slipped."

"Any recommendations?" Talbot asked. "Other than security, I mean."

"Sure. The usual suggestions, the ones everyone ignores. They'll be in my report. More R&R. After-hours socials. Counseling. A morale officer."

"What about Banner?"

"It's really not my job to say so, but you might cut him some

slack. Following the Robot took guts, and staying with me until help arrived shows compassion.''

''I can think of other explanations.''

''Maybe. That doesn't make them right, though.''

''Bah,'' Talbot said. ''He's hiding something. Someday, somehow, I'll find out what.''

Banner watched Scheer emerge from the Administration Building. They had not spoken since medics had carried the still-unconscious Scheer back to base. Twice, Banner had tried to visit him in the infirmary; twice, he had been turned away by armed guards. Now, he saw his chance.

''Dr. Scheer,'' he said, stepping closer. ''How are you?''

Scheer looked at him wanly. ''I'll live,'' he replied. He tapped one temple. ''Mild concussion, from when the Robot dropped me. I need aspirin, fluids, and bed rest. Talbot can spare me the first two, but not the third.''

Banner looked at him, wondering what to say. Scheer was a trained observer with a good memory, he knew. He remembered the psychiatrist, still in the Robot's grasp, staring desperately at him. He remembered seeing the terror in Scheer's eyes become something else.

How much had Scheer seen? How much did he remember?

What had he told Talbot?

During the long wait for help to arrive, Banner had toyed with simply leaving—leaving Scheer, leaving Betty, leaving behind an existence that the Hulk had ruined. Let Ross find a new scientist to bully, let Talbot find someone else to torment, let Betty find another man to love her. Only Scheer, helpless and unconscious, had given him pause. He had been unable to abandon the man who now might hold Banner's fate in his hands.

''Talbot's a jerk,'' Banner heard himself say.

''He's just doing his job, remember?'' Scheer replied, clearly amused by Banner's comment.

''He can do it and be a jerk, too,'' Banner said, matter-of-factly. ''But what about you and your job?''

''Done. I leave this afternoon.''

"Did you report—" Banner's words faded into awkward silence.

"About you? Don't worry—I'll report that you're fit for duty. You have some problems, but I'm not one of them."

The world suddenly lifted itself from Banner's shoulders.

Scheer continued. "I still think you'd benefit from therapy, but you seem to be surviving in difficult circumstances. Maybe that just makes you stronger. Try to look at it that way."

The words seemed to carry hidden meaning. Banner looked at him, puzzled, but couldn't read anything in Scheer's eyes. "Uh, thanks, I guess," he said.

"No. Thank you. Thanks for staying until help came." Scheer took Banner's hand in his and shook it. "I owed you for that, and more."

"Um, I—"

"Too bad I missed so much of the excitement, though," Scheer said. "I wish I had seen the Hulk."

"You didn't—" Banner began.

"Live with it, Bruce," Scheer said softly. He repeated words he had spoken days before. "Learn to manage it. Strike a balance."

Banner watched, stunned, as Scheer turned and strode towards the guest barracks. He kept watching, wondering, even after the psychiatrist was lost to sight.

Banner thought about the Hulk, who had stolen so much of his life; then he thought about Scheer, held helpless in the Robot's claws. Scheer would be dead now, if not for the Hulk. The base would be dead, too, killed by the blast that Banner's other self had smothered. The Hulk was a curse, certainly.

But maybe, sometimes, in some situations, a curse could be a blessing, too. Maybe there was some balance in that.

With a thoughtful smile that came all too rarely these days, Banner turned, too, and headed back to his lab and his life.

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

Glenn Greenberg

Illustration by Herb Trimpe

The creature stood amidst the flaming wreckage. He was as massive as he was tall; a seven foot wall of solid muscle. His skin was emerald green, and he was wearing nothing but the tattered, torn remnants of a pair of purple slacks. His face looked almost Neanderthal, with a pronounced brow that practically hung over his wild eyes, a small, pug nose, and a large wide mouth that seemed permanently carved into a frightening grimace.

His angry eyes darted back and forth as he watched the flames lick and dance upon the torn, twisted chunks of metal that were strewn across the woods, deep within the Rocky Mountains of northwestern North America. He took a deep breath, filled his lungs with the cool, mid-afternoon air, and grunted in satisfaction.

Just minutes ago, this wreckage had been six United States Air Force fighter jets, which had fired upon him with state-of-the-art, heat-seeking, guided missiles—weapons powerful enough to destroy everything within a ten-block radius in a major city.

But upon the creature, they didn't even make a scratch.

And, once he was fired upon, the creature swiftly retaliated.

Uprooting fully-grown trees as easily as carrots from a garden, the creature threw them hundreds of feet upward, to crash into the jets with such force that the planes were shattered in half. The pilots, despite their shock and terror, managed to eject from their cockpits and deploy their parachutes . . . barely in time. But as they floated back toward Mother Earth, the same thought filled their minds:

I'm still alive, but for how long? Just how angry did we make him . . . ?

As if in response, the air was suddenly filled with the sound of an animalistic roar.

"Stupid, puny humans!" the creature bellowed. "How many times does Hulk have to warn you before you listen?! Stop hunting Hulk! Stop hounding Hulk! Stop attacking Hulk! Or Hulk will smash you all!" The creature's voice was gruff, deep, and loud, and the rage it contained was almost a tangible thing.

Floating down toward the rough terrain below, the pilots watched as the Hulk launched himself skyward in a powerful leap, propelled by the strongest leg muscles on Earth.

Miles away, the Hulk descended from his single leap, landing with a resounding *thoom* that caused trees for miles around to shake and the various wildlife—birds, rabbits, and deer among them—to scatter in surprise and fear. The Hulk gazed at his surroundings. He was in a clearing in the woods, with a field of grass that basked in the glow of the late-afternoon sunlight. It was peaceful here. Quiet. He liked it.

He sat down on the grass, beneath a tall tree, his anger and rage already dissipating. His heartbeat and pulse rate slowed. His eyelids drooped. This place was so calm, so tranquil, so relaxing, that the Hulk allowed himself to give in to the exhaustion that was making his limbs, his head, seem so heavy. The last thing he saw before sleep finally overcame him was his own hand starting to shrink and change color, from emerald green to the same pink-colored hue as the puny humans who hunted him. . . .

Moments later, the Hulk was gone. Taking his place underneath the tree, half-naked, curled up in a ball and shivering in the cool air as he slipped deeper into an exhausted sleep, was Dr. Robert Bruce Banner, the renowned nuclear physicist. One of the most brilliant men in the world. And the Hulk's alter ego.

Bruce slept soundly under the tree, oblivious of the two men who were slowly, cautiously approaching him.

Bruce slowly opened his eyes, tried to focus. He felt a soft pillow supporting his head, a nice, firm mattress underneath his body, and a comfortable blanket covering him. The room, as it became clearer to his still-blurred vision, was unfamiliar to him, but it had a sense of warmth to it, one that immediately made him feel at home. There was wood paneling on the walls, a large bookcase across from the bed, filled with dozens of hardcover books. Beside that was a large, ma-

hogany desk, with a personal computer situated on top and a comfortable-looking chair pushed against it.

Bruce realized that the bed he was laying on was actually a sofa that folded out into a bed, which implied to him that he was in someone's den, which doubled as a guest room. But whose house was this? Where was he? The smell of some delicious food wafted in from the next room. Vegetable soup? He couldn't be sure, but his stomach immediately began to grumble loudly. How long had it been since he'd last eaten?

"Sounds like you're pretty hungry," Bruce heard someone say from outside the room.

Bruce looked to the doorway to see an older, distinguished-looking gentleman entering. He was followed by a large, shy-looking, muscular young man, about twenty-five years old, who was wearing a flannel workshirt and denim overalls. The older man was smiling and carrying a tray that held a bowl of the delicious-smelling food.

"Sorry about that," Bruce replied, a bit embarrassed that his noisy stomach could apparently be heard from the next room. He sat up in the sofa-bed. "I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't starving. How long have I been sleeping?"

"We found you late yesterday afternoon, around four thirty," the older man said as he placed the tray on Bruce's lap. "That was twenty-five hours ago."

The older man motioned to Bruce to start eating. Bruce happily obliged, and the older man pulled the chair over from the desk to the side of the bed and sat down.

It was after he'd had a few mouthfuls of soup and had finally seen his host up close, that Bruce became fully alert and realized that he knew who this man was. Once he got over his initial shock, he broke out into a wide grin.

"You're Dr. Henry Thesiger, aren't you?" Bruce asked, unable to contain his enthusiasm.

The older man nodded. "I'm surprised that you recognize me. I'm hardly a celebrity."

Bruce chuckled. "Are you kidding? You're one of my heroes. I studied you and your work throughout high school and college." He

looked down at his bare chest, ran a hand through his dirty, unkempt hair, and smiled sheepishly. "I may not look it right now, but I'm a scientist, as well."

Thesiger gently smiled. "I'm well aware of who you are, Dr. Banner, and I'm flattered by your kind words. Thank you. I'm not used to having such praise heaped upon me, especially these days."

Bruce nodded in understanding. "You dropped out of sight a few years back, didn't you? No new articles or books, no public appearances, no teaching engagements. I'd heard you'd pretty much become a recluse."

"I had . . . other concerns that took up the bulk of my time," Thesiger replied.

Bruce shook his head and smiled, still trying to accept the fact that he was actually conversing with one of his heroes. "I'd always wanted to get a chance to meet you, talk with you. Your work was groundbreaking, incredibly innovative. You were such an inspiration to me! I just wish I could be meeting you now under better circumstances. You're not exactly catching me at my best. . . ."

Thesiger waved his hand in a dismissive manner. "Please, don't concern yourself." He turned to the young man who had accompanied him into the room, summoning him over.

"Dr. Banner," Thesiger began, "allow me to introduce you to Barney Garvin, my assistant. He's been working for me since he was a child. Barney, this is Dr. Bruce Banner. He's a scientist, like me."

Barney slowly reached out with his big hand and shook Bruce's. "Nice to meet ya, Doctuh B-bannuh," he said, in a somewhat tentative and nervous voice. There was something about him, Bruce noted. The way he talked, the way he carried himself. He seemed a bit slow-witted, perhaps mildly retarded. But there was a warmth and friendliness in Barney's eyes that was almost touching.

"Nice to meet you, too, Barney," Bruce replied with a smile. "Please, call me Bruce. You know, you're very lucky to have gotten to work with Dr. Thesiger for so long. I would have *killed* for such an opportunity."

Barney frowned. "Really?" he asked, obviously confused. "I never had to kill no one."

Thesiger chuckled as he gently patted Barney on the back. "He's just using a figure of speech, Barney. And he's being far too complimentary. You're quite an innovator yourself, Dr. Banner. I've followed your work for quite some time, and I've been very impressed with your accomplishments."

Bruce's eyes widened. "Really? You've followed my work? That's an honor, sir!"

Thesiger replied, " 'Sir'? It's Henry, please. You're one of my colleagues, not one of my students. And yes, I found your work most intriguing. A terrible shame you were so sidetracked after your accident in New Mexico."

Bruce's face darkened at the mention of the "accident." Obviously, if the older scientist knew who he was, then surely he knew that his guest was also the Hulk. What would he do with that knowledge?

"Uh, yes, about that accident. . . ." Bruce began tentatively.

"Don't worry, Dr. Banner," Thesiger interrupted with a calming tone. "I have no intention of turning you in to the authorities. Yes, I know you became the Hulk as a result of that accident, but I also know that you're hardly a criminal. That all you really want is a chance to cure yourself."

Bruce nodded, clearly relieved. After a few moments of silence, he finally said, "I don't remember much from the last few days. I was hitchhiking, on my way to a research lab in Colorado where they're making some progress in the treatment of radiation poisoning. I thought that if I could get in there, spend some time in their labs, I could at least get some preliminary work done on a cure for my . . . condition.

"Unfortunately, I passed through the wrong small town on the way there. The sheriff, who didn't like strangers in his jurisdiction, picked me up for vagrancy. Threw me in jail until my court date the next morning. To make matters worse, my cellmate didn't like the idea of having a roommate, and he decided to . . . *explain* that to me, in the strongest possible way. I remember him punching me a few times, but everything after that is hazy."

Thesiger nodded. "You changed, I presume? There were reports two nights ago about the Hulk tearing up a small Colorado town, and Air Force jets showing up to drive him away."

Banner looked grim. "Was anyone hurt? Or . . . killed?"

Thesiger shook his head. "From what I hear, there were no serious injuries. Just a great deal of property damage."

Banner sighed. No lives lost, thank God, but how many lives were now ruined? Ruined because of him? Because of the Hulk?

Thesiger studied him for a moment. "Once Barney and I brought you back here and I realized who you were, I began thinking about your condition, how your body was changed by the gamma rays, and what could possibly be done to correct it. I've come up with a few theories, possible treatments that just might help you. If you're interested, I'd be more than happy to share them with you. Maybe we can find the final answers together."

Bruce laughed. "Interested in the chance for a cure? To lead a normal life again? To finally be free of the Hulk? And to work with one of my idols, on top of all that? I'd be thrilled!"

"Excellent, Dr. Banner . . . Bruce," a smiling Thesiger replied as they enthusiastically shook hands. "We'll get started first thing in the morning. In the meantime, we'll see what we can do about getting you some new clothes. I don't think you'd want your entire wardrobe to consist of a torn pair of purple slacks, would you? Then, after Barney goes home, you and I can spend the rest of the evening comparing notes on all the pompous asses in the scientific community."

Bruce shifted uncomfortably. "Dr. Thesiger . . . Henry . . . I don't know what to say. You're being far too generous—"

The older scientist cut him off with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Let's just call it a byproduct of the mutual admiration society we have going here, all right? I'm looking forward to working with you, Bruce."

"As am I, Henry," Bruce replied enthusiastically. "As am I."

Early the next morning, Thesiger, Bruce, and Barney gathered in the scientist's home laboratory, located in the basement, and set down to work. As Barney cleaned the equipment and made sure that the

machines and computers were functioning properly—actions which startled Bruce, given the younger man's apparent mental deficiencies—Bruce studied the notes and theories that Thesiger had already jotted down on paper. Bruce's immediate reaction was that Thesiger had come up with a brilliant approach to deal with his problem, but it was also a long and complex one.

"What I'm proposing," Thesiger explained, "is that we forget about trying to rid your body of all the gamma radiation it absorbed. That's what you've been trying to do for years now, and the simple fact is that it's just not practical. You absorbed far too much radiation from the gamma bomb blast, and your body has been irrevocably changed by it. It can never go back to being what it was before the accident, and there's no way we can get around that.

"But what we *can* do—I hope—is tinker with your body chemistry enough so that we could essentially place a 'blanket' over your body's ability to transform into the Hulk. It wouldn't be a cure in the truest sense of the word, since the gamma radiation will always be there in your cells, but it should render your body incapable of triggering any further transformations into the Hulk."

Bruce was silent for several long minutes, taking all of this in. He looked again at Thesiger's notes, at the preliminary scientific equations and formulae that the older scientist had already gathered, to demonstrate how they could go about getting started. Bruce stared intensely at all the numbers and diagrams, his mind picking up where Thesiger's had left off and continuing the equations to their next logical step.

It's possible, he silently told himself. *It could work. After all this time, all these years, could I finally, really be on the brink of ridding myself—and the world—of the Hulk? But . . . what if this process fails? What if it makes matters worse? Am I desperate enough to jump at any chance that comes my way? To take such a risk . . . ?*

"What do you think?" Thesiger asked.

Bruce looked up from the notes and directly at his idol. There was a gleam in Banner's eyes now, a gleam that radiated hope and determination. Slowly, he smiled. There could be only one answer.

"Let's do it."

* * *

Weeks passed. Weeks in which a strong bond of friendship formed between the two scientists, each of whom felt as if they had found a kindred spirit in the other. During the day, they would work on the process that could potentially wipe the Hulk from existence. In the evenings, during and after dinner, they would trade stories of their experiences over the years as scientists, about the people that they had known and worked with. Much to their mutual delight, they found that they knew some of the same people. Then they'd head back down to the basement lab and work until midnight, at which point they were ready to collapse from exhaustion. The following morning, they'd start all over again.

But Bruce enjoyed every minute of it. He was working as a scientist again, with a man he greatly admired and respected. And each passing day brought him closer to the end of his long, nightmarish existence as the man who became a monster.

Bruce had also become fast friends with Barney, who proved to be a quick study, a hard worker, and a genuinely good-natured soul. Thesiger explained to Bruce that a lack of oxygen to Barney's brain during birth caused some brain damage. Despite this misfortune, Barney demonstrated a strong desire and willingness to learn, to work, to make himself useful. His mother, as fate would have it, was Henry's housekeeper, so the scientist was able to recognize the boy's attributes fairly early on, when Barney was entering his teens. Henry hired the boy to assist him in the lab, a job that Barney had kept all through the years. His mother had retired a few years earlier, and his father died when he was four years old, so Barney still lived with her nearby and helped support her with the money that he made from Thesiger. In many ways, the scientist had become a surrogate father to Barney, and Thesiger treated Barney more like a blood relation than an employee.

All in all, this was a good, productive, peaceful period for Bruce Banner. Perhaps it would prove to be a preview of his future . . . ?

It was time.

The day arrived when Thesiger and Bruce agreed that the process

was completed—the apparatus that they had designed and constructed for the operation was ready to be used. With a mixture of anticipation and uneasiness, Bruce began a procedure that would alter him at the genetic level, possibly changing his life forever, possibly for the better. There was no turning back . . . nor did Bruce want to.

He lay on the operating table, directly underneath the huge machine that would enable Thesiger to probe and manipulate his body chemistry. As the anesthesia took effect and sleep approached, Bruce looked over at Thesiger and Barney. The scientist was clearly concerned, but he managed a smile.

Barney, who didn't fully comprehend what was being done, gave Bruce a thumbs-up. "Don't you worry, Bruce," he said with a grin. "Doc Henry'll make you all better!"

Then Bruce was engulfed by darkness.

Bruce regained consciousness after thirty-six hours.

Laying in bed, staring at the cream-colored ceiling of his room, Bruce blinked to clear his hazy vision. A movement at the end of the bed caught his attention.

Thesiger sat beside the bed, his fingers placed lightly on Bruce's wrist; he was taking Bruce's pulse. The older scientist looked up to see that his patient was awake. He smiled.

"How do you feel?"

Bruce paused before answering, then frowned. "I'm not sure. I'd expected to feel—"

"Different?"

Bruce nodded. A haunted look came into his eyes. "Maybe the process didn't work."

Thesiger sat back, tapped his chin as he pondered the matter. He shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

They went outside, to a secluded area in the woods, where they wouldn't be observed. Bruce sat down on a large rock while Thesiger prepared a hypodermic needle.

"Henry," Bruce began warily, "are you sure you want to do this?

What if it didn't work? If I change, you could be in great danger. Do you really want to take such a chance?''

Thesiger grinned. ''You're my friend,'' he replied. ''We've come this far together. I have no intention of letting you go it alone now that we're in the home stretch. Now, give me your arm.''

Bruce reluctantly obliged. Thesiger then injected a dose of adrenaline into his arm that would drastically—but only for a short time—increase Bruce's heart rate and speed up his pulse. The aim was to set into motion the physical conditions that would normally trigger Bruce Banner's metamorphosis into the Hulk. They sat and waited for the serum to take effect.

They didn't have long to wait.

Sweat broke out on Bruce's forehead. He clutched his chest, feeling his heart beating like a jackhammer.

He doubled over, expecting his head to start throbbing and pounding, waiting for his skin to start feeling as if it were on fire, right down to the nerve endings. For his shirt to split down his back and fall to the ground in tatters. For his shoes to burst open. For his thoughts to become clouded, simple, almost primal. For the color of his flesh to change to an emerald green.

But none of that happened.

Bruce suddenly realized that the transformation was not taking place. He should have been fully transformed by now. But he remained Bruce Banner. He remained human.

He sat there, on the rock, in stunned silence, pulse rate slowing to a normal level. He looked up to see Henry Thesiger smiling at him.

''Congratulations, Bruce. You're free.''

Tears welled up in Bruce's eyes. He lowered his head, and quietly wept, letting the tears start to wash away the pain and suffering and loss and torment that he had endured over the last several years.

Thesiger sat down beside Bruce and placed his arm around the younger scientist . . . as a father would with his son.

Days passed. Bruce began to feel like a man who had undergone an exorcism. It was as though his personal demon had been banished, never to return, and the world was now a bright, wonderful place. He

couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd felt that way . . . or if he'd ever felt that way before.

Bruce wondered what his next move should be. Go public, announce to the press that the Hulk was now gone? Turn himself in to his longtime pursuer, General Thaddeus "Thunderbolt" Ross, and let government scientists confirm his claim? Whatever his decision, Bruce knew he could not stay at Henry Thesiger's home for much longer. Despite the fact that the scientist had invited him to stay on for as long as he liked, Bruce knew that he had to get on with his life, that he couldn't continue to impose upon his friend's generosity and hospitality, no matter how many times Thesiger insisted it was no imposition.

He owed Thesiger so much already. For now, though, all he could offer in return was his eternal gratitude. And his eternal friendship.

Bruce started packing his belongings. It was time to move on.

The following morning, when he was down in the lab collecting some of his notebooks, Bruce noticed a thick file—marked BANNER NOTES—sitting on top of a small desk. Curious, Bruce flipped through the file, and was taken aback by what he found: charts, diagrams, and graphs that Henry had compiled, all about Bruce.

Apparently, during the entire time that they had been working together, Thesiger had been keeping detailed notes about Bruce's condition, particularly the physiological changes that his body underwent after being caught in the blast of the gamma bomb. The strange part was, Bruce never saw any of this material before, and none of it was used when they were working on the cure. What was it for, then?

Also contained in the files were transcripts of some of their evening conversations, in which Bruce had described at length some of the more intriguing side effects of his condition, such as the Hulk's rapid healing ability, immunity to all known diseases, invulnerability, seemingly limitless strength. Had Henry been *recording* these conversations? What was all this about?

"I owe you an explanation," said a voice from behind him.

Bruce turned to face Thesiger, surprised that he had not heard the

scientist enter the lab. He placed the file back on the desk and sat down on a nearby stool, mulling over how to approach this situation.

"I'm not sure you owe me an explanation, Henry," Bruce began. "I mean, you're a scientist. And my case is . . . *unique*, to say the least. Some would go so far as saying that it's of great scientific importance, so I'm not surprised you kept notes about it. I don't even mind. I'm sure that what happened to me will be the subject of a lot of research and study in the future. If anyone deserves the most detailed records possible of my condition, it's you.

"But what concerns me is that you didn't even tell me you were doing it, that it was done almost in secret. I mean, *transcripts* of our conversations, Henry?"

Thesiger remained silent for several long moments, looking as though he had something to say, but was unsure of how to go about saying it. Bruce grew concerned. They never had difficulty talking to each other before. Why was there a problem between them now?

"When I first found you, out in the woods . . ." Thesiger began hesitantly. "It was no mere coincidence that I was there."

The way it had originally been explained to Bruce was that Thesiger and Barney had gone hiking together in the mountains and simply come across his unconscious form under the tree. They brought him back to Thesiger's house and put him to bed, where he slept until the next day. Bruce wondered what this new information meant.

Thesiger continued. "I was actually looking for you. I knew that the Hulk was approaching the area, since it was all over the news. I was hoping to make contact with him—or you, for that matter. Whichever one of you was in control. So Barney and I headed into the mountains, to try to find you. We used a portable Geiger counter to detect any traces of radiation, and after a while, it led us right to you."

Bruce nodded. "All right . . . but why *were* you looking for me, Henry? Not just to help me find a cure, I assume."

Thesiger shook his head. "No, not just for that, although I was happy to do it." He paused, as though debating with himself over what he should do next. Then, jaw firmly set, he looked at Bruce. "All right. It's time I explained everything to you."

Thesiger walked over to the rear of the lab and pressed a switch concealed under a work table. Immediately, the far wall slid back, revealing an inner chamber. Thesiger motioned to Bruce, to follow him in to this hidden room.

Slowly, hesitantly, Bruce moved to join the older scientist.

"Don't worry, my friend," Thesiger said with a grin. "There's nothing sinister going on here."

They entered the chamber.

The room was bathed in a cool, pale blue glow, and was much colder than the exterior lab. Bruce rubbed his upper arms to try to keep warm. A low, constant humming noise filled the air, no doubt provided by the various computers and generators spread around the room, their operation lights blinking at a steady pace. Cables and power conduits connected the machinery to a large, six-foot-long metal tank located at the center of the chamber.

Bruce noticed a small transparent window built into the top of the tank. The glass was frosted over, making it difficult to see what was inside. Bruce moved closer to get a better look, and peered into the window as best he could.

His eyes widened, and he pulled back in shock.

"There's someone inside!" he exclaimed. "A woman!"

Bruce looked at Thesiger, who seemed almost disturbingly calm.

"Yes," Thesiger simply replied.

Bruce felt anxiety welling up within him. He was genuinely nervous now, nervous about Thesiger, a man he had come to implicitly respect and trust. He didn't like that feeling. He didn't like it at all.

"Who's in there? Tell me what this is all about, Henry," Bruce demanded, trying to keep his voice under control.

Thesiger walked over to the tank and gently placed his hand upon the window. He absently started to caress it.

"A wonderful, beautiful woman," he said, in a voice filled with both love and sadness. "The light of my life. This is my fiancée, Bruce. Her name is Caroline. Caroline Hartley."

" 'Is'?" Bruce asked. "Not 'was'?"

Thesiger looked intensely into Bruce's eyes. "She's not dead,

Bruce, but in a state of suspended animation. I've placed her in cryogenic freeze, slowed down her metabolism and all her bodily functions to a point just before death.''

Bruce looked incredulous. ''For God's sake . . . why?''

Thesiger's gaze dropped toward the floor, his face filled with sorrow. ''She's dying, Bruce. Of a terminal blood disease so rare there isn't even a name for it, and it's not in any medical books. The doctors who examined her had no idea how to treat it. All they could do was jab her with needles and scratch their heads and apologize because they simply didn't know what to do. I was expected to just sit there and watch her slowly waste away until there was nothing left!''

The scientist shook his head and looked up at Bruce. ''I refused to accept that! I had to do something, I had to save her! She was the only thing in my life that really mattered—more than my career, more than my own life! Can you understand that, Bruce?''

Bruce silently nodded. For a brief moment, the image of Betty Ross swam before his eyes. The woman he had once loved, and helplessly watched be driven away from him by the spectre of the Hulk.

Bruce quickly pushed aside the thought of her.

Thesiger continued. ''Caroline only had a little time left, but I had an idea, one that I shared with her. She gave me her consent to go ahead with it. So I took her out of the hospital and brought her here. I built this hidden laboratory, set everything up.

''Finally, I placed her in suspended animation, where she'd remain alive but in stasis. That way, the disease couldn't spread any further, and I'd have all the time I needed—time to search for a cure, to develop one myself, if I had to. To make her healthy again, so that we could live out the rest of our lives together, just as we had planned.''

''That's why you dropped out of sight all those years ago, isn't it?'' Bruce asked. ''So that you could devote all your time to curing her?''

Thesiger closed his eyes and nodded. ''But in all that time, I was no closer to finding a cure than I was at the start. When I heard that you were nearby, I knew that I was being given a profound opportunity to save Caroline. If I could somehow unlock the secrets of your

gamma-irradiated physiology, which gave you superhuman strength and incredible healing powers, I could perhaps apply them to Caroline's condition and reverse it. Helping you cure yourself gave me the chance to study your condition up close, to learn as much as I possibly could about what those gamma rays did to you. Working on a cure for you would benefit *both* of us!''

Bruce took a deep breath and sighed. This was a lot to take in all at once. And yet, he now had the answers he wanted. Except for one.

''Henry . . . why didn't you tell me any of this from the very beginning?''

''I didn't know you then,'' the older man replied. ''I wasn't sure I could trust you. I was afraid that if you learned that I was keeping my fiancée's body frozen in my basement, you'd think that I was some kind of lunatic, and it would scare you away. And if you turned me in, the police would come and take her away, maybe take her out of suspended animation, in which case she'd die for sure.

''But that was then. I've come to know you and trust you, Bruce. I value our friendship dearly. That's why I'm revealing all of this to you now.''

Bruce placed his hand on Thesiger's shoulder. ''All right, Henry. I understand now. I'm sorry you've had to endure this for so long. Where are you now, in terms of your research?''

Thesiger's spirits seemed to lift. ''Well, with everything I've learned from studying you, I believe I'm now ready to start treating Caroline. I've run some preliminary tests, and the results are extremely promising. You've told me several times how you didn't know how you could ever repay me for helping you. Well, Bruce, if this works . . . you'll have repaid me a thousandfold.''

He cleared his throat, and smiled at the younger man. ''Now, then, Dr. Banner, you have a new life to get ready for. So get out of this freezing cold basement already! I'm going to stay down here and start Caroline's treatments.''

''You mean *we're* going to start Caroline's treatments,'' Bruce replied. ''I'm helping you, Henry. Just like you helped me.''

''Bruce, this isn't your problem,'' Thesiger protested. ''You've

waited a long time for the chance to rejoin the world. I don't want to keep you from it any longer."

"You stayed at my side till the very end, Henry," Bruce replied, with a great deal of affection and gratitude. "When we ran the test to see if I would still become the Hulk, you refused to leave, even though your life could have been in danger. Well, I'm not leaving your side until *this* is finished."

Thesiger grinned at his friend. "Let's get to work, then. I'll call Barney and have him come over and help us set up. And, Bruce . . . thank you."

As it was with Bruce, the process to cure Caroline proved to be a long and complex one. But with Thesiger, Bruce, and Barney working together, they eventually reached the final stage of the procedure. It involved treating Caroline with a dose of gamma radiation, provided by a gamma ray projector the two scientists had constructed, and then, using the apparatus that had earlier altered Bruce's body chemistry, to prevent her from mutating into another, possibly monstrous, form. But to do all this, they had to remove her from the tank, which had kept her alive and her disease halted for years. Once she was out of the tank, the disease would start spreading again. They would have to act quickly.

Standing at the computer console that maintained the suspended animation tank, Bruce deactivated the tank's locking mechanism and pressed the control key that would open the lid. A loud hiss filled the room as the lid slowly rose, exposing Caroline's body to the air for the first time in years.

Thesiger, standing by the tank, slowly reached in and gently touched his fiancée's cheek. His eyes filled with tears.

Bruce looked over and caught a glimpse of the body inside. She was clearly beautiful, of that there was no doubt. Bruce considered Thesiger a lucky man.

Barney, who had wandered over to stand beside Bruce, also looked over at the tank.

"Hunh. Miss Caroline," Barney said, almost in a whisper. He turned to Bruce and smiled. "She looks 'zactly like I 'member her. She ain't gotten any older."

The suspended animation process has obviously kept her perfectly preserved, Bruce thought. *As the years have passed, she's remained the same physical age she was at when she was placed into the tank. She still looks like she's in her late twenties. Henry told me that there had been a considerable age difference between them to begin with. Now that difference will be even more obvious. I guess that'll be difficult for them to adjust to at first. But they'll get past it, considering how much love they had for each other.*

"All right, let's get her out of this thing," Thesiger said in a no-nonsense tone. "The disease is already spreading again."

Barney helped Thesiger take Caroline out of the tank and carry her over to the operating table in the next room. Bruce followed, jumped on to another computer console, and started programming it for the procedure. They were well underway.

The entire process took about eleven hours to complete, by which point all three men were physically and mentally exhausted. They put Caroline to bed in the suspended animation chamber, which had been converted into a makeshift recovery room. Well aware that it would be some time before they knew whether the operation had been successful, they collapsed in laboratory chairs, too tired to climb up the stairs to the bedrooms, and unwilling to leave Caroline alone, in case there were complications during her recovery.

Five hours later, Bruce stirred. Groggily, he massaged his stiff neck, rubbed his sleep-crusted eyelids. Light sleeper that he was, something had roused him from his slumber.

The sound was soft, almost muffled.

A voice?

He heard the noise again. It *was* a voice. Faint, hardly above a whisper. But it wasn't Thesiger's, or Barney's.

It was coming from the other room.

Bruce's eyes widened and his throat tightened.

"Henry, wake up!" he hissed as he shook the older scientist by the shoulder. Not waiting for a response, Bruce raced toward the recovery room. He came to an abrupt halt just inside the doorway.

Caroline was sitting up in bed, looking obviously confused.

A small gasp of surprise from behind him caused Bruce to turn. Thesiger was there, mouth agape. Slowly, the older scientist approached his fiancée, a broad smile spreading across his haggard, exhausted face.

"Caroline, my darling Caroline," Thesiger muttered. "You're back. After all this time, you're back."

Bruce watched as Thesiger got down on his knees beside the bed. He took one of Caroline's hands into his and kissed it gently. He looked up into her crystal blue eyes.

"I love you so much," Thesiger told her.

Caroline looked back into Thesiger's eyes, and smiled curiously. She opened her mouth to speak. The first words she would speak in years.

"Who . . . who are you?" she asked innocently.

A chill ran down Bruce's spine. He watched as Thesiger turned to face him, and saw a look of dread on the older scientist's face that echoed his own.

"She's perfectly healthy. The disease has been completely nullified. So what's wrong with her memory?" shouted Thesiger as he paced back and forth in his library. Bruce sat in an easy chair, quietly listening as the older man vented his frustrations.

"It's been three days now," Thesiger continued. "We've run every test on her that we possibly could. Physically, she's made a complete recovery. But mentally, she's a complete blank slate! She can't remember me, our relationship, everything we shared! For God's sake, she doesn't remember anything about *herself*—not even her own name! What went wrong?"

"It may have something to do with her time in suspended animation," Bruce replied. "It's a tricky process, and there can be no guarantee that a subject will come out of it unchanged. Maybe her memory loss is only temporary?"

Thesiger brightened at the prospect of that. "Yes. Perhaps all she needs is time, and then it will all start coming back to her. Maybe that's all she needs. . . ."

The sound of approaching footsteps caught their attention. They

turned to see Caroline standing in the doorway, looking unsure of whether or not to come in. She wore a simple blouse and a denim skirt—Thesiger had kept her clothing in the house over the long years.

Bruce was once more taken aback by just how breathtakingly beautiful she was. And having gotten to interact with her over the last three days, he quickly realized how gentle, sweet, and sensitive she was—traits which, according to Thesiger, definitely carried over from before the suspended animation.

Bruce suddenly realized that he had been staring at Caroline, and quickly turned away.

"I hope I'm not interrupting . . . ?" Caroline said, a bit nervously.

"Not at all, Caroline, not at all," Thesiger replied. "Come on in. Bruce and I were just talking about how happy we are with the progress you're making."

Caroline smiled. "Well, I haven't forgotten anything from the last three days. If you consider that progress, I'll gladly take it!"

Thesiger chuckled and directed her to a couch, planting himself on the armrest next to her. He took her hand in his. "Have you been able to remember anything, *anything*, from before?"

Caroline frowned. "I'm sorry, no. It's like everything from before three days ago is just a big black void. I can't remember anything. I try, all the time, to remember something, anything, but there's just nothing there. And I get headaches from trying so hard to remember."

Thesiger patted her shoulder. "It'll be all right. It'll all come back to you."

Caroline gave him a little peck on the cheek, then turned to Bruce. "What do *you* think, Bruce? Will my memory return? *Can* it return?"

Bruce rose from his chair, smiling at her. "If anyone can help you get it back, it's Henry. In fact, you two should probably talk, get reacquainted with each other. Maybe look at some old photos—that might jog your memory a little. I've got some things to take care of, so I'll leave the two of you alone."

Bruce started walking out of the room and had the strangest feeling that a pair of eyes were watching him. He turned to look back and saw that the eyes belonged to Caroline. She was definitely looking his way and smiling.

Bruce smiled back, a bit bewildered, and walked out of the room.

* * *

The next evening, after dinner, Bruce was in his room, finishing up packing his things. With Caroline back, and Thesiger focused on helping her regain her memory, Bruce took it as a sign that it was definitely time for him to leave. He had put it off long enough, and though he was pleased to have been able to help Thesiger, he knew his own return to society was long overdue. But there was something else prompting him to move on.

The truth was, Bruce was becoming attracted to Caroline—her beauty, her personality, her zest for life. She was an uncommon woman, with a bright, sparkling spirit that Bruce was finding himself more and more drawn to. He had to leave. Caroline and Thesiger needed the chance to start over again, to get to know each other again, to live out the rest of their lives together.

Suddenly, he heard shouting coming from the library. Something inside the study fell and shattered—or was it thrown? Then Bruce heard Caroline scream. He raced to the library and threw open the door.

Caroline ran into his arms. "Oh, Bruce! Thank God, you're here!" she cried as she hugged him tightly.

Thesiger stood on the far side of the room, eyes burning with a cold, irrational anger, hands balled into tightly clenched fists. The sight startled Bruce. He had never seen the scientist quite like this before, and it disturbed him. Bruce's gaze moved to the floor. An antique lamp lay broken into pieces.

Bruce, still holding onto Caroline, kept his cool and asked, "What's going on here, Henry?"

Thesiger took a deep breath and slowly opened his fists. In the blink of an eye, he was back to normal. Bruce found it unsettling.

"Nothing, Bruce. Caroline and I were working on restoring some of her memories, and we hit a brick wall. I got a little frustrated, that's all. I guess I'm just tired—getting irritable and impatient. I knocked over the lamp and it startled her. Don't worry about it."

Bruce looked down at Caroline and saw the fear in her eyes. A lamp getting knocked onto the floor wouldn't inspire that kind of response.

"Caroline, why don't you go up to your room for a little while?" Bruce said to her gently. "Henry and I need to talk."

She nodded, kissed him gently and affectionately on the cheek, and walked out. Bruce closed the door of the library and stared at Thesiger.

"Henry," he began slowly, carefully, "I know you're under a great deal of strain. I know how upset you are that Caroline isn't making any progress in getting her memories back, and that you've become increasingly frustrated and depressed over the last few days. Maybe even a bit resentful.

"But you can't *force* her memories to return. You can't *will* them to return. And you have to face the possibility that she may never get them back. She has to start a new life, from scratch."

Thesiger trembled slightly. "A new life? From scratch?" he rasped. "With or without me in the picture?"

Bruce shook his head. "I don't know. That's up to her to decide."

"Up to her?!" Thesiger roared. "She doesn't even remember who I am, or what we were to each other! We were supposed to be *married* by now, Bruce. We were supposed to have a *family.* How can I just let all of that slip through my fingers?"

Bruce didn't have an answer.

Early the next morning, Bruce sat at the foot of his bed, his clothes and belongings packed in a large, brown, leather shoulder bag. He wondered if he was doing the right thing by leaving. Certainly, Thesiger and Caroline had a long way to go in terms of discovering each other once again, and that was hampered by Bruce's presence.

But a change had come over Thesiger. He wasn't being patient or understanding, but short-tempered, and was scaring Caroline. Was it fair to just leave her in the care of a man she didn't know, a man who at times frightened her?

Suddenly, she was standing in the doorway of his room.

"Bruce, are you going away?" she asked, her voice tinged with worry. She was staring at the shoulder bag.

Bruce looked at her and sighed. "I think it's time, Caroline. I've overstayed my welcome. I don't belong here anymore, and I'm just getting in the way."

She walked into the room and sat beside him on the bed—a little too close to him, as far as Bruce was concerned.

"Does Henry know?" she asked.

"He knows it's been coming for a while," Bruce replied. "He went into town to pick up Barney. I'll say my good-byes when they get here."

"Would it make any difference to you if I said I didn't want you to leave?" she asked hopefully.

He frowned. "I have a life to get back to, Caroline. A life that was put on hold for far too long."

"Is there anyone waiting for you back there? A wife, or a girlfriend?"

"No, not really," he said with a hint of regret.

"Well, then, what's your rush?" she asked with a smile.

Bruce smiled back. "Rush? I've stayed here much longer than I probably should have. And as much as I have a life to get back to, you have a life to begin."

Now, Caroline frowned. "A life where a man I barely know has expectations of me that I can't possibly fulfill? I know Henry loves me, Bruce, and I understand we had something special years ago, but I can't remember it! I mean, I'm very fond of him, he's been trying so hard to be patient and understanding. But I know he's at the end of his rope with me, and I can understand why. He thought everything would just go back to the way it was, once I was out of that tank.

"My memory loss was something that he just wasn't prepared for, and he's having a hard time accepting it. Deep down, I think he realizes that I don't feel about him the way he feels about me . . . that I *can't* feel that way."

Bruce turned to her. "You have to give it some time. You loved him before. If you get to know him again, those old feelings could resurface."

Caroline shook her head. "No, Bruce. I can't feel that way about him . . . because I've fallen in love with *you.*"

Bruce stared at her in silence. Part of him wanted to tell her that she was mistaken, confused, that in time she would sort out all her feelings and realize that her place was with Thesiger.

But another part of him made him recall how he'd caught her glancing his way and smiling at him over the last few days, how she had kissed him on the cheek the night before. If she were as attracted to him as he was to her. . . .

No, Bruce silently, sharply told himself. *This can't happen. I can't let this happen. Not to Henry. Of all people, not to Henry.*

"Caroline," he started, "I think you're just confused, you need some time to sort out your feelings. Believe me, things will be clearer once I'm gone and—"

Caroline moved in closer. "I'm in love with you, Bruce Banner," she said softly. "There's nothing confusing about it. And I've seen the way you look at me. You feel the same way about me, you're just not willing to admit it."

"I—I—" Bruce started, but he couldn't finish. He couldn't admit it, that was true. And he couldn't lie to her, either. He didn't know *what* to say.

And then she kissed him.

No, this is wrong! Bruce's mind roared. *I can't let this go any further, I can't! I have to get out of here, I can't betray Henry like this!*

But she kissed him with more passion, more hunger, and he was finding it difficult to resist.

Finally, at long last, Bruce succumbed to the feelings that he had been secretly harboring for her ever since the moment he first saw her. He closed his eyes, and returned her kisses.

And hated himself for it.

Suddenly, Bruce opened his eyes. He knew. He didn't know how he knew, but he knew.

Thesiger was there, standing in the doorway, dumbstruck, mouth hanging open in utter amazement. He had been watching. And Barney was standing behind him, also in shock. They must have gotten back from town and entered the house without Bruce and Caroline hearing it. And he saw. He saw them.

"Henry . . ." Bruce started, not really sure of what to say.

Caroline covered her mouth with her hand, but Bruce wasn't sure if it was more out of surprise than any feelings of shame.

"I can't believe this," Thesiger finally found the strength to say. "The two people I cared about more than anything, and this is what you do the second my back is turned?!"

He pointed an accusatory finger at Caroline. "How could you?" he asked, trembling with rage. "Do you know how much I've loved you? What I've been through over these long years, to bring you back, so that we could be together? Do you have any idea how much I've sacrificed, all for you?!"

Caroline looked down, sadly. "I'm sorry, Henry. I truly am. I wish things could have worked out—"

"Shut up!" Thesiger bellowed. "Spare me your pity! Pity's the last thing I want from you!"

He then turned to Bruce. "And you! I opened my house to you! Took you in, helped you get your life back! Came to trust you and love you like a brother! And *this* is how you treat me?"

Bruce stood up and took a step toward Thesiger. "Let me explain," he began, trying not to provoke the older man.

But it was too late. The scientist lunged at Bruce.

"You betrayed me!" he screamed. "You ungrateful piece of garbage!"

Thesiger pummelled Bruce with his fists, attacking the younger man with a viciousness that was as frightening as it was shocking. And Bruce, racked with guilt and shame, did not even offer a defense. He couldn't bring himself to lay a hand on his friend. And he couldn't help but feel that he deserved this.

Caroline was screaming, begging the scientist to stop, but Thesiger ignored her.

"Both of you owe your lives to me!" he screamed as he continued to assault Banner. "And now you've destroyed me! I should have realized what was happening! The way you two looked at each other! The stolen glances! I should have done something about it, but I chose to ignore it, because I trusted you!"

Bruce could tell that a couple of ribs had been cracked, his nose was bleeding, one of his eyes had begun to swell. And he could tell that Henry was far from finished with him.

Finally, Caroline threw herself in between Bruce and Thesiger.

"Are you going to attack me, too, Henry?" she screamed. "Go ahead! Hit me, if it makes you feel better! This is my fault, not Bruce's! He was going to leave, and I begged him to stay! Because I love him! I'm sorry, Henry, but it's true! I love him!"

Thesiger froze. The blood drained from his face. Sweat poured from his forehead. His eyes bulged. There was no telling what he would do next.

"Get out," he finally said, in a voice as cold as death. "Both of you. Get out of my house. Now."

Thesiger grabbed Bruce by the collar, pulled him from the room and over to the front door, which he swiftly opened. He roughly shoved Banner out the door, causing the younger man to stumble and fall to the ground. Thesiger then turned, went back into the guest room, angrily grabbed Caroline by the wrist, and shoved her out the front door, as well.

Caroline ran to Bruce, helped him to his feet. She gasped as she took a good look at his black eye, the blood trickling from his nose and mouth, the cuts and bruises scattered across his face and body. Angrily, she turned to Thesiger.

"You *monster*," she spat at him.

Thesiger silently glared at her and went back into the house. Moments later, Caroline's clothes and Bruce's shoulder bag were thrown at them.

"I don't want to see either of you ever again," Thesiger told them. "Get off my property. *Now!*"

Bruce staggered towards Thesiger, reaching out to him. "Henry," he began.

Suddenly, Barney stepped in front of Banner, blocking his way, looking both angry and hurt.

"You said you was Doc Henry's friend, Bruce, but you hurt him. I saw what you was doing with Miss Caroline. Friends ain't supposed to hurt each other. An' if Doc Henry says he don't want you around no more, then you better go. Just leave him alone."

"Come on inside, Barney," Thesiger called out to his assistant. He looked and sounded like a desolate, haunted soul. He patted Barney

on the shoulder. "You're all I have left now, do you know that? The only friend I've got in the world."

Thesiger and Barney turned and entered the house together. The door slammed shut.

Bruce and Caroline stood silent for a long moment. Finally, Caroline started crying, and Bruce took her in his arms to console her.

"What am I going to do, Bruce?" she wept. "I don't know where to go, or how to get along in the world!"

"I'm not leaving you alone," he told her gently.

But as they picked up their belongings and began to walk down the road away from Henry Thesiger's house, Bruce stopped. He turned to look at the house again.

"I have to go back," he said, barely above a whisper. "I can't let it end like this."

"You can't be serious," Caroline said in obvious disbelief.

Bruce looked into her eyes and frowned. "I once pledged eternal friendship to that man. All things told, I did a pretty lousy job living up to it. I have to at least try to make peace with him. For him. For you. For my soul."

Bruce placed his shoulder bag down on the ground and started walking back to the house. "Wait here," he told Caroline. "I'll be back soon."

After several moments of pounding on the door, Bruce was gratified when Thesiger finally opened it.

"I told you I didn't want to see you again," Thesiger said with a scowl.

Bruce said firmly, "Henry, we have to talk. There are some things you have to understand. And . . . I just can't leave things the way they are now."

After a long pause, during which Thesiger closely scrutinized Bruce, he finally nodded. "All right. Come on in."

Bruce entered the house, but as the front door closed, he felt a sharp pain in the back of his head. His knees buckled, and he collapsed to the floor. He looked up to see Barney looming over him, his hands clenched into huge fists.

"Our enemy has come back to hurt us, Barney," Thesiger said to his slow-witted assistant. "Didn't you tell him not to come back?"

"Yeah, I told 'im," Barney replied menacingly.

Thesiger asked, "I told you what to do to him if he ever came back, didn't I, Barney?"

Barney slowly nodded.

Bruce blurted out, "Barney, I'm not your enemy! I'm your friend! And I'm Doc Henry's friend, too! Let me explain!"

But Barney ignored Bruce and lunged for him, grabbed him, and punched him right in the stomach. Banner writhed in pain.

"Henry," Bruce groaned. "You've gone insane! Stop this!"

"Stop it?!" Thesiger said with a laugh. "It's just getting started!"

Then, at Thesiger's urging, Barney proceeded to beat his large fists into Bruce, over and over, for what seemed like an eternity.

Bruce was losing consciousness. Darkness was rapidly closing in on him. He knew that without immediate medical treatment, he would die. And Thesiger wasn't about to call an ambulance for him.

Dimly, he could see Barney raising one of his fists, about to deliver what would undoubtedly be the killing blow.

But then, surprisingly, Thesiger stopped him.

Thesiger bent down to closely examine Bruce's beaten, battered body. Bruce was clinging precariously to consciousness, knowing that it was a struggle he was about to lose. Before the darkness finally claimed him, however, he was able to hear Thesiger commenting to Barney:

"Well, my friend, it seems Dr. Banner here has sustained some serious injuries. He'll need immediate *treatment*. Barney, help me get him down to the lab. . . ."

When Bruce finally opened his eyes again, he immediately realized that he was in the hidden room behind Thesiger's basement lab—the same room where Caroline's suspended animation tank had been kept. His ankles and wrists were chained to a wall on the far side of the room.

He scanned the room and discovered, to his horror, that Caroline

was lying nearby, on the floor. Bruce panicked at first. Was she all right? She was lying so *still*. . . .

But then he could see that she was still breathing; she was only unconscious. He breathed a sigh of relief, then looked to the doorway as he heard footsteps approaching.

Thesiger entered the room and glared at Bruce.

"So, you're awake," he said to his prisoner, voice dripping with false cordiality. "Good. We can finally get this show on the road."

Bruce leaned forward as much as the manacles would allow. "Dear God, Henry," he cried, gesturing toward Caroline. "Why?! Why are you involving her in this?"

Thesiger calmly replied, "Caroline called me a monster . . . and she was right, in a way." He smiled wickedly. "But I'm not the only monster here . . . *am* I, Bruce?"

Banner cocked his head, stared at Thesiger for a long moment, searching for the meaning in the older scientist's words.

Then, realization struck him.

"While I was unconscious . . . you turned me back, didn't you?" he said, voice barely above a whisper.

Thesiger nodded enthusiastically. "I removed the 'blanket,' yes. And before the two of you die, I want this unfaithful little tramp to see what she chose over me. She called me a monster, chose you over me . . . but the funny thing is, you're as much of a monster as *I* am. Even *more* so! And now she'll see it for herself. Try to win her heart *now,* Bruce, once she sees up close and personal the demon inside you!"

Bruce glared at Thesiger, unable to utter a word. He was too consumed with sorrow, regret, and hatred.

"But just to ensure that this remains a . . . 'controlled' environment," Thesiger continued, clearly enjoying his triumph and gesturing to someone in the next room, "allow me to *reintroduce* you to my most trusted friend and assistant!"

Banner watched in horror as a huge, shambling, misshapen figure entered the room. It was quiet possibly the most repulsive creature he had ever seen.

Its emerald-hued skin was marred by a number of ugly, gray

patches. A mass of tangled, black hair framed its cruel face. And judging from the blank, vacant, almost dead look in its eyes, it appeared to be incapable of a single rational thought. Torn and tattered denim overalls clung to its grotesque body. Bruce's blood ran cold as he realized who this mockery of a man had once been.

"Barney," Bruce whispered, eyes filling with tears. *Oh, God, no,* he thought bitterly. *Henry used what he'd learned from studying me, to turn Barney into this . . . this thing!*

Bruce was racked with misery, haunted by the knowledge that this insanity had now pulled the innocent, loyal, well-meaning young man into its clutches. And that, in the end, Barney was going to suffer the most from it all.

"I'm going to wait until Caroline wakes up," Thesiger explained with a smug grin. "Then, I want her to watch as I trigger the change in you. And as she sees you for what you *really* are—but before your little transformation is complete—I'm going to have Barney kill the two of you. And then, Bruce, this pathetic little love triangle will finally be over."

"You lunatic!" Bruce cried. "Caroline and Barney—they were the *innocents* in all this! Why couldn't you just leave them alone? If you want blood so badly, then take *mine*, not hers! If you're going to blame anyone for what happened, then blame *me*!"

Thesiger shook his head. "It's not going to work that way, Bruce. *Both* of you betrayed me. You betrayed my trust, and the love that I had for both of you. All I have left is my hatred, and my need to see justice done. And it *will* be done, Bruce."

Bruce Banner had finally reached his breaking point.

All the hatred and anger that had been building up inside him finally rose to the surface. He looked at the repulsive creature that had once been Barney Garvin. He looked at the unconscious form of the woman he had come to love, her life now in danger because of him. Finally, he looked at Henry Thesiger, the architect of this madness and misery. And all of it fueled his rage.

Bruce Banner felt his brain begin to burn, the cells inside his body start to explode, his body begin to grow.

And for the first time that he could recall, he actually *welcomed* it.

* * *

Thesiger watched in frustration as Banner's skin color started to shift to emerald green, as he became too large to fit into his clothes.

"No!" Thesiger cried out. "She's not awake yet! She's supposed to *see* this! She has to see you change! It's not supposed to happen this way!"

Events were spiraling out of his control. Thesiger had to act quickly, or he would lose everything. He turned to Barney.

"Kill him!" Thesiger shouted to the shambling monstrosity. "Kill him before he fully changes!"

"Kill?" a rough, booming voice said from behind them. "Kill *Hulk*?"

Thesiger looked back at the wall, and he knew that it was too late.

Chained to the wall, in Banner's place, was the Hulk.

Transformation completed.

"No one is killing Hulk today!" the jade-skinned giant bellowed. He snapped the chains off his wrists and ankles as if they were made of licorice.

Thesiger pointed at the Hulk, and shouted at Barney, "Get him, Barney! Attack! Kill him before he can hurt your friend!"

As though comprehending Thesiger's words, Barney lunged at the Hulk and viciously grabbed his throat, trying to strangle the life out of him. The Hulk was momentarily surprised by the brutality of the attack, but quickly recovered and shoved the other creature back.

"You are strong," the Hulk told Barney. "But Hulk is stronger! Hulk is the strongest one there is!"

Barney leapt onto the Hulk, slamming the jade giant into a wall, then landed blows to his head and stomach. The Hulk punched back, his massive fist landing squarely on Barney's jaw.

Clearly stunned by the blow, Barney could not resist as the Hulk grabbed him, and threw him across the room. Barney crashed into the suspended animation tank, which smashed to pieces.

The Hulk glared at Barney, who was already rising to his feet. "If you make Hulk have to smash you again, green man," he warned, "then Hulk will keep smashing and smashing, until you can't get up anymore!"

If Barney understood what the Hulk was saying, he certainly didn't show it. He lunged at the Hulk again, growling like a wild animal, trying to claw out the Hulk's eyes and rip open his throat.

The Hulk angrily slammed his fists into Barney's side, which sent Bareny flying through a wall and into Thesiger's main lab. The Hulk followed, smashing through the part of the wall that had remained intact. They grappled in the center of the room, brutally pounding on each other's thick, green hides.

As they fought, they completely destroyed the special apparatus that had once been used to cure Bruce Banner. The Hulk then slammed Barney into the gamma ray projector that had been used to treat Caroline's disease, and to change Barney into his monstrous form. The projector exploded and fire quickly spread across the laboratory, consuming most of the computers and lab equipment.

The Hulk grabbed at Barney, who opened his mouth wide and sank his teeth into the Hulk's arm. The jade giant felt his skin breaking, and warm blood pouring out. He howled in pain.

Savagely, he pounded his fist into Barney's face. Staggered by the blow, the creature released the Hulk's arm. The green behemoth pressed his advantage, pummeling Barney's stomach and head. He kept pounding and pounding and pounding, long after Barney stopped even trying to defend himself.

Finally, the Hulk stopped, and Barney collapsed onto the floor in a crumpled heap.

The Hulk looked down at Barney with contempt. "Hulk told you, stupid green man. Hulk is stronger than you. Hulk is the strongest one there is."

Henry Thesiger watched in desperation and despair. The apparatus he and Bruce had created, along with the gamma ray projector, had both been destroyed. The designs for these devices, along with all of his notes, his journals—everything he had dreamed about and developed and accomplished throughout his life and career—were being consumed by the flames. Lost forever. And the flames were spreading around him.

This was not supposed to happen. The ones who betrayed him

should have died. He should have been enjoying his triumph over his enemies and getting on with his life. He looked over at the unconscious form of Caroline, the woman he had once loved more than life itself. And then, he did what he had to do.

He left her there, to be consumed by the flames, as he tried to make his escape.

Everything was rapidly burning up around the Hulk. He looked through the gaping hole in the wall, into the next room, to see the unconscious body of a woman. Something inside the jade giant desperately cried out to him to save her. Every fiber of his being told him to get her out of there, right away. He did not know who she was, he did not recognize her, but somehow, he knew that she was precious to him. He did not bother to question what his instincts were telling him. He rushed into the room, gently picked her up, and began to carry her out.

But then he stopped and looked back. He seemed to remember that there was someone else in this room. A man, wasn't it? He should be saved too, shouldn't he? But where was he?

The Hulk looked around the room, through the flames and smoke, but could find no trace of anyone else. He shrugged, satisfied that he was just remembering things wrong, as he sometimes did, and carried the woman out of the inferno.

Thesiger made his way around the flames, rushing to a window on the far side of the laboratory. With access to the stairs cut off, the only way out was through that window. He began to climb up . . . only to stop short as a sharp, stabbing pain tore through his ankle. He cried out, and looked down to see what caused it.

It was Barney—bloodied, beaten, almost unconscious, unable to walk. The flames surrounded him, and he was clearly frightened. He clutched Thesiger's ankle, looking up at the scientist with pleading, trusting eyes that begged Thesiger not to leave him alone. He was like a small child, desperately afraid, crying, looking up to his father figure for hope and protection.

Thesiger felt a surge of sympathy for the creature. After all, Barney

had never betrayed him. Barney had faithfully stayed by his side over the years. Barney had been his truest friend.

But there was no way Barney could be saved. He could not make it out of the lab on his own, that was obvious. And he was simply too heavy for Thesiger to carry. Time was running out. Thesiger had no choice.

He started kicking at Barney's head, trying to get the creature to let go of him. But Barney's grip was like a vise. He pulled Thesiger down, away from the window, and hugged him tightly. Thesiger struggled to get free, but to no avail.

As Barney held him and sobbed and rocked back and forth, Henry Thesiger watched helplessly as the flames closed in on both of them.

Outside, the Hulk wandered off into the night, carrying the unconscious woman he did not recognize but cherished nonetheless, for some reason he still did not understand.

Behind him, the house of Henry Thesiger was consumed by the flames.

Bruce Banner stepped out of the bedroom of the small motel room he and Caroline had rented. He was carrying his brown leather shoulder bag, which he had gone back to the ruins of Henry Thesiger's house to retrieve, along with Caroline's clothes. Bruce had found everything still sitting on the road outside of the house, right where they had been left.

Bruce noticed immediately that Caroline was crying. She had been crying for quite some time, ever since he told her he had to leave. It was one week after the terrible experience back at Henry's house. She had been unconscious for most of it, so Bruce had to fill her in on what happened. She knew that Henry and poor Barney were lost to the flames, and she mourned for them. As did Bruce.

But Bruce knew that Caroline expected both of them to just get past it over time, and that they would begin a new life together. It was a terrible shock for her to discover that she was wrong.

Bruce had never told Caroline exactly how Henry Thesiger had

helped him. How could he explain the Hulk to her? During the time he was cured, he felt it was better left in the past.

But now the Hulk had resurfaced. He knew he could not burden her with this awful truth. He was being pulled away from her, and he could not tell her why.

He went over to the couch, silent, put his arms around Caroline and held her tightly for a long time. Finally, he let go of her and stood up. He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket, with his handwriting on it. He handed it to her.

In a faltering voice, he said, "This is the name and address of a doctor I know, a psychiatrist by the name of Leonard Samson. He'll be able to help you fully readjust to society. You've come such a long way already, he'll get you through the rest. Please go to him. And please . . . grab whatever chance you get to have a happy life."

They shared a long, intense, silent embrace, and a soft, loving kiss that never could have lasted long enough. A tear rolled down Bruce's cheek as he walked out the door, not daring to look back.

Once again, he was a wanderer. An outcast.

Once again, he was alone.

TRUCK STOP

Jo Duffy

Illustration by John Pierard

It started the way too many of my days do, with cold and darkness and hunger, waking alone in a strange place, with my clothes torn half off, and no idea of how I'd come to be there, or even where I was. It started with disorientation and fear, and a bone-wearying fatigue that wasn't mine by right, but was mine to endure, the exhaustion of a monster who had spent himself doing heaven-knows-what, and then, when the simple act of rational thought became too much for him, had opted out, leaving me to deal with the consequences. It was what I had long since grown used to, but would never accept. My life . . . since the accident.

There was someone bending over me, shaking my shoulder. I flinched away, before I realized that if he meant me any harm, he could easily have already done it. What could I do to stop him, disoriented as I was, my glasses lost who knows where (again!), never a tall man, with the muscles of a scientist rather than an athlete, so weak and unphysical that even my own alter ego would castigate me with the epithet *puny*?

"Hey, buddy. . . ."

That was how the stranger me addressed me. I felt an immediate affinity for him. With all the awakenings in unfamiliar surroundings and uncertain situations, I had become pretty good at assessing the character and intent of those around me. On the run, you learn pretty quickly who'll leave you alone, and who's a predator, a bully, a hunter with that inevitable pack of friends looking for someone with whom they can "make something of it." You learn to spot kindness, too, and appreciate it, to cherish what an unexpectedly decent soul will be willing to do for you. My life, once consumed with the matter of science and quantum mechanics, with particle accelerators and reactors and cold bombs and gamma radiation, was now all about the kindness of strangers.

Rico Melvin, helping me into the cab of the big-rig truck he'd stopped when he saw me lying alone by the side of a mountain road, was one of the kind ones. I knew that even before he'd offered me

the bulky, oversized sweater he kept with him for cold nights. By the time he poured me a cup of coffee—bitter and black, but still hot and strong and fragrant—from the thermos he kept under the seat, I was willing to name him saint.

"So, you were in an accident, right?" he asked me, with a kind of anxious serenity, as he shifted into gear.

"That's right," I replied, "an accident," silently adding, "You could say that." It had been an accident. No point in telling him what kind of accident it had been, nor how long ago it occurred. No point in his ever finding out what had happened one fine day at ground zero on a gamma bomb test site, or hearing what accidental irradiation had done to me and my cellular structure. With a little luck for both of us, Rico would never know any more of me than what I told him now.

"So," he added, still pleasantly, eyes still carefully ahead, though there were no other vehicles or headlights anywhere in sight along the winding, wooded highway, "I didn't quite catch your name back there."

"Bruce," I replied, taking another sip of the coffee, and added, after a hesitation so small I hoped he didn't notice, "Bainbridge." And all the while I prayed that he didn't put two and two together, waiting for him to connect Bruce Bainbridge with Bruce Banner, to remember the stories in all the papers, to recognize my face from the television news reports, to connect my name with the failed test, and the monster that men named the Hulk. Devoutly hoping that he would never connect me with the devastation and destruction the great, green behemoth often left in its wake.

Once a man of pure science, I spent a lot of my time now praying, and as I prayed, I waited for Rico to connect me with the werewolf of science I had become, to realize that with Jekyll beside him, Hyde might yet appear. I waited for him to shrink from me in fear, to lose control of the truck, to, if he was lucky, regain control long enough to pull over and shrilly order me away. Worse yet for us both, he might come for me with a weapon. I waited, as I always do, holding my breath until he spoke.

"Glad to know you, Bainbridge."

So there was the first hurdle passed. The first lie had been accepted.

I drank the coffee while Rico rambled on about a truck stop he would take me to, a place that had the prettiest waitresses and the best apple pie in three states. I shifted a little in my seat as I listened, wishing there were a newspaper with us, wishing I had my glasses so I could read, wanting yet dreading to scan the headlines for the word, *Hulk.* I desperately wanted some clue of what my alter ego had been up to since I'd last transformed, to learn what damage he might have caused, what armies he might have routed.

Whether or not he had killed anyone.

Not that I needed a paper. Rico began to ramble, glad for the company. I let myself listen and relax, lulled by the running commentary on exactly what was up with the world as far as Rico Melvin was concerned. I felt myself begin to doze.

Be at peace, my inner voice told me. *Feel safe. Trust this man. Sleep away some of the pain and the weakness that the beast's latest rampage has left you.*

That inner voice, and Rico's droning, and the overall, bone-deep weariness—those were my excuses. I don't know what Rico's were.

Maybe, when we passed the crucial turn-off, he was looking at me instead of the highway, emphasizing some point about taxes, or strikes, or the effect of free agency on the rise of his favorite sports star. Maybe the trees had overgrown the sign that marked the fork we never found. Maybe the marker was just plain gone.

But however it happened, when morning came, we were far, far away from the highway we should have been on, the interstate we could have taken to Rico's truck stop. We were lost in the middle of nowhere, on a lonely mountain road.

I jerked awake as Rico downshifted.

"What the hell is this?" he swore.

Sitting up fast, I accidentally splashed the last mouthful of the tepid coffee from the cup I still held over the tattered remains of my pants and the hem of Rico's borrowed sweater.

"Where are we? Just where in hell are we?" Rico repeated, aggrievedly. "Hey, Bainbridge, do you know where we are?"

Knuckling my eyes and swiping an arm across my face, I looked

around and then pointed at a sign to the right of the road, half overgrown with weeds and bramble, faded, peeling, badly in need of repainting.

" 'Welcome to Futility,' " I read aloud. "Population . . ." I strained for a moment, before realizing that my eyes were simply not going to cooperate, and added, dispiritedly, ". . . some small number."

"Oh, man," Rico muttered, slowing the truck to a crawl, looking out through the windshield, angrily shifting his head from side to side, as though unable quite to believe this had happened to him. "We must have missed the turnoff. Oh, man. Now we gotta find out how to get back to the interstate. Sorry 'bout this, Bainbridge."

No reply seemed necessary, but I said, "It's okay" anyway. Rico was, it seemed, judging by his fairly calm attitude, one of that fortunate breed to whom nothing very bad ever happened, and so didn't know he should be angered or upset by this turn of events.

"Futility," Rico muttered. "I've heard of it. It's on some of the older maps. An old mining town. They closed the place up years ago, because everyone who ever came here wasted their lives away, going broke breaking their backs until the day they died. None of the strikes here ever really panned out. That's how the place got its name. I didn't even know anyone lived here.

"Look, Bainbridge," he added, still considerate, "I can't go on. Not without some downtime. Not without some coffee. It was already a long haul before I picked you up, and even if you told me right now you could handle an eighteen-wheel rig, I couldn't risk letting you spell me. Not with the load of cargo I got."

So I shook my head, and assured Rico that there was no way I could ever drive his truck, and added that I wouldn't be sorry for a little coffee and some downtime, maybe even some food, myself.

He pulled the rig into what must have been the center of town. It was a pretty typical commercial rural district that could almost have been a truck stop itself, given the enormous number and immense variety of vans and eighteen-wheelers that were parked there—except for the absence of people. There was almost no sign of human habitation.

A barbershop, not open. A gas station, deserted. A newsstand, empty, a few papers from a seemingly ancient stack tied up on the sidewalk outside. A grocery store, deserted. A bookstore, boarded up.

And then, when we were almost to the end of town, heading for a cliff wall that looked like a dead end, we saw the open diner and the sign that said HOPE.

That's where Rico chose to park.

Hopping down from the cab, I took a better look and realized that what the sign really said was HOPE'S PLACE, but the neon had burned out on over half the letters. I winced when I hit the street, and Rico exclaimed when he noticed that what had left me without a shirt and strained my pants almost to indecency (the burgeoning green muscle, sinew, and bone mass of a rampaging monster) had also carried off my shoes. He pulled an old pair of sneakers out of the back of the cab—several sizes too large for me, but warm and cozy and indescribably welcome. I tied them around my ankles so that, if I didn't try to run and jump in them, they would probably stay on.

Rico seemed anxious to get inside, to the warmth, the lights, the wonderful smells of coffee, eggs and bacon, and fresh pastries. Here was manna. Here, I could repay him for his acts of kindness, for to my astonishment and relief, the inner pocket to my pants was still safely intact.

The waitress who came out from the kitchen in answer to our call further drew Rico's attention away from our predicament. She was slender, blonde, and lovely, her slim form displayed to admiration by the pastel cotton of her uniform. After taking one glance at her warm and inviting smile, and another at the stunned countenance of my comrade—who bore the dazed and happy look of a man who'd been gazing too long into the brilliance of the sun and was still enjoying the view—I realized that Rico was well and truly smitten.

Hope Marlowe, as she was called, seemed pleased and not too surprised to see customers so early in the morning, even in a ghost town like this one. Despite a certain air of sadness, she gamely and good-humoredly kept up with our demands for mountains of food, dozens of eggs (scrambled just as Rico liked them), an entire loaf of bread—toasted, and liberally spread with butter—pounds of bacon,

and what must have seemed like gallons of hot, sweet, wonderful coffee.

Rico—now that I could see him upright and in the light of day—was revealed as tall, dark, and handsome, broad-shouldered, pleasant featured, and curly-haired. He seemed to have an almost insatiable appetite following his long haul (perhaps enhanced by knowing the meal was free). I had a lot of refueling to do, myself—the byproduct of an average man's body saddled with the gargantuan hunger and thirst of a monster who routinely expended vast amounts of energy, but who often neglected to eat or drink before transforming back.

Long after Rico had mostly sated himself, and was lazing comfortably over the last few bites, lounging on his stool at the counter, I continued to feast, devouring plate after plate of food, and cup after cup of coffee. Hope stared at me, frankly amazed, but too polite to say anything.

Rico, apparently feeling some explanation was called for, said, "Bruce is okay. He was just in an accident."

After that, Hope was treated to a sample of Rico's volubility, and I listened with amusement to Rico's extending himself to be even more pleasant than before. He was clearly intent on charming the sad-eyed, short-order Venus, even as he enjoyed the remnants of his breakfast. The waitress smiled, and hovered around the table, keeping the coffee pot at the ready as, with every appearance of pleasure, she let him work his wiles.

It was with some surprise, when I'd finally had enough to eat, that I realized I was not alone, either. At some point, a little shadow had slipped close to my side. I turned, and found myself facing a little girl, perhaps eight years old, bright eyed, and pretty. Although her coloring was somewhat darker, she looked enough like Hope that she was almost certainly her daughter.

The little girl commented with awe—and a certain disdain—on the amount of food I'd put away. When I laughed and admitted that it probably hadn't been the most healthful breakfast ever, she seemed to relax and accept me, and thereafter chattered on, with a child's lack of self-consciousness, all about the region we were in. By the time my final cup of coffee was gone, I had learned many of the legends

that haunted these hills, including the stories of mass disappearances—both of longtime locals and of newly-arrived miners—leading to the rumors that persisted even to this day. The little girl also told me that the hills were haunted by evil spirits, who jealously guarded the whispered-of veins of gold.

"People disappeared, honey, because they didn't want to stay here," Hope corrected her daughter. "They lost their stake money looking for ore that never turned up. Or they found a little bit—"

"And were murdered by pirates!" the child interrupted with relish. "Or by claim jumpers. Or the ghosts of the people who are angry they got killed before."

"Your daughter has quite an imagination," I remarked.

"She gets it from her father," Hope replied. "Vic could always spin a good yarn. People loved to come in here and order up a little bit of nothing, just so they could sit a while and listen to him. They did that right up till the day he died."

Hope began to clear our dirty plates away.

"What's your name?" I asked the little girl.

The child looked at me with clear brown eyes, tipped her head to one side, and answered, "Betty."

I wasn't quite prepared for the stab of pain that that name gave me, the mosaic of memories it unleashed: of beauty and gentleness and strength, all mixed together in an unexpected way; of a paramilitary princess in a flight suit, apple of the flinty eye of her father, General "Thunderbolt" Ross, one of the most hardheaded officers in the entire United States armed forces. Betty Ross, reared on an endless series of military bases, then turned up her perfect nose at all the officers and politicians laying handsome bodies and brilliant careers at her feet. Unexpectedly, astonishingly, she stepped over the entire assortment and planted herself firmly at the side of the quiet and unremarkable man who loved her most of all.

My Betty.

The girl I left behind. In my other life.

I was filled with sudden, fervent hope and certainty that this child, this little Betty Marlowe, would grow up into someone equally

brave and equally remarkable. And, with any luck, far more fortunate in love.

"She's heard the stories often enough, growing up here," Hope commented, referring to the legends Betty had recounted. Hope smiled indulgently at her daughter, patting her head fondly, and yet still with that same subtle air of regret. "We know all the great stories of Futility. . . ."

"We're practically royalty here," Betty added, clearly pleased to have an audience. "My Momma's family used to own most of the town. We still own that big mountain where the road ends."

"A stupendous legacy," Hope murmured sadly. "A pile of rocks and a hole in the ground, surrounded by lots of nothing, dead center in the middle of nowhere." Her voice drifted off for a moment.

Wherever her imagination had taken her, Hope came out of the fit in a brisker mood. She shook herself and produced a pad, beginning to total up the bill. "Nice of you boys to stop in here. I know you won't be coming through again, but it was pleasant having the business, and the company. You *are* in a hurry now, right?" Her tone brooked no contradiction.

"Uhhh. Uh, yeah. In a hurry. I guess we are," Rico answered, disappointed and puzzled by Hope's sudden coolness. "I got someplace I have to be anyhow, and we still haven't reported Bruce's accident." He glanced my way, and—not wanting the subject of that accident to go any farther—I made a great show of figuring the tip, with little Betty closely watching. Rico turned back to Hope with a sigh and added, "But I wouldn't mind coming by again . . . if I could just figure out the way. Maybe you could give me some directions? All I know is, we missed the entrance to Route 80, and ended up right here."

"Route 80," Hope repeated, her voice hushed, as though she were speaking in church and didn't want to have the minister glaring her way. "Didn't you see the signs? The turnoff . . . Wasn't . . . wasn't it marked?"

"Maybe it was," Rico admitted easily. "Me an' Bruce might have just missed it. Anyway, we ended up kind of stuck here . . . not that I mind," he added gallantly, though he might as well have been telling

a horror story, from the effect his words were having on Hope. "Maybe if you point me to a street that's wide enough, I could turn my rig around—"

"Your rig?" Hope repeated, voice hushed, her eyes widening. Now, her fear was evident. "You're a trucker?"

I began to get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"You have to go," Hope insisted. "Both of you. Now. While you still can. Forget your truck and leave!"

And before Rico could even voice a protest at the bizarre command, Betty called to Hope from the window that looked out into the street.

"Mommy," Betty said, "they're coming."

The tone in that little girl's voice made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

"Oh, God," Hope replied. "Then there isn't any time. We have to hide you in the back before—"

The front door flew open, and slammed against the jamb. Five men came through the door.

Hope jumped and gave a gasp, knocking a tray of silver onto the floor. A man came in from the rear of the diner, entering through the kitchen.

I started feeling very sick, and it had nothing to do with my breakfast.

None of the men were taller than Rico, and only one was as tall, but several of them were broader, two visibly hard and muscular, and a third, huge and big-bellied, but hard and strong-looking for all of that. One of them was of African descent, and one looked Latino, perhaps with some Native American blood. But in all essential ways, these men were of a type—leather-skinned, broken-nailed, and greasy haired, wearing denim and flannel and leather and chains. Some of them looked smarter than others, and some of them looked meaner. Collectively, they were the epitome of every bully and every predator I had ever faced.

Betty gave a little squeal of fright, and tried to run back toward her mother, but one of the new arrivals stopped her.

He was the tallest man, and marginally the cleanest, possibly the smartest of the pack, and possibly the leader. He was rock hard,

diamond hard, and hard eyed, and he held the child against his legs easily. Hope gasped, raising a hand to her mouth.

"Morning, Hope."

He said it as if it were just a pleasant salutation from friend to friend, as though he hadn't come in with a gang, as though the woman he spoke to wasn't shaking and pale, as though he wasn't restraining her child.

Rico started forward, and would have gone to Betty's defense, but Hope held him where he was, her fingertips feather light on his arm.

"What do you want, Steve?" Hope demanded, with a strength and steadiness that made me applaud her courage.

"Cup of coffee, maybe a short stack," the man replied, showing his teeth in what might have been meant as a smile. "Pass the day with an old friend. Maybe make some new ones."

He finally let Betty go, knowing the child would understand she was only free because it was his whim. She ran from him, wild eyed, toward her mother, but before she reached the end of the counter, one of Steve's friends was there, blocking her way. When she tried to bypass him, there was another, grinning down at her like a gargoyle.

I held out my hand, and she ran to me and threw herself against my side. I held her there, one arm around her shoulders, hoping it made her feel a little safer, knowing myself what it is to be afraid.

"You changed the signs again, Steve," Hope said, her voice flat and accusing.

"I don't know what you're accusing me of, darlin'," Steve replied, and several of his friends snickered. "Can't a man come and say good morning to an old friend without her accusin' him of all kinds of things?"

"These men missed the turnoff for Route 80," Hope continued. "The sign for that turnoff is big and well marked. No one ever misses it, unless it's been taken down."

"These men?" Steve repeated, as though noticing Rico and me for the first time. "These men," he repeated, raising his voice a little, and Betty shied away.

"Now, this one," Steve added, inspecting Rico from head to toe, as my easy-going savior fumed. "This one I can believe is a knight

of the highway. He looks like a man who works for a living, ain't afraid to get his hands dirty doin' his job.

"But this other one," he added, turning his attention my way, scaring Betty into sliding away from me, to hide behind some stools. "This one . . . Look at them big clown shoes, and them dirty, raggedy pants. This one looks like a real charity case. What we used to call a 'bum.'

"That what you are, Mister?" he asked me, his manner still jocularly offensive. "You a bum?"

I kept silent.

"Don't that bother you none?" he added, swinging suddenly again toward Rico. "Don't it bother you that he's a bum? Don't it bother you to be workin' for a living and end up givin' out free rides to a bum? Don't you worry he'll get your truck dirty? Ain't you afraid he'll rob you? Maybe steal one of them fancy, expensive computers you got packed into the trailer of that rig?"

"My rig was locked!" Rico exclaimed furiously, anger overcoming his caution. "How do you know what I'm hauling?"

"Because it ain't your truck no more, boy," the fat man informed him, feeling it was time he had his share of this conversation. "And neither is anything in it."

The black man said, "If you have a problem with that, then you never should have come here." All of them laughed, and he added, "This town and everything in it belongs to us."

"Everything," Steve said. He reached out to caress Hope's cheek; she grimaced and flinched back.

With an oath, Rico struck Steve's hand away from her.

Steve grinned, as though that was what he had been waiting for. Planting his feet, he took a hefty swing at Rico. Rico ducked and drew his own arm back.

But he never completed his punch.

As soon as he moved, he was grabbed from behind by two of Steve's friends. They held him in place as Steve hungrily licked his chops and waded in. He pummelled Rico in the stomach and the face, until I caught Steve's arm and tried to pull him away. Steve scowled

and shook me off the way a dog throws a chew toy, and the force of his arm sent me reeling into the hands of the Latino, who held me.

One of the others slammed me in the stomach and the face until my head spun, and I began to feel strangely sick and cold in a way I'd felt before. My vision began to tunnel, and I squirmed out of their hands and headed for the door, hoping to avert disaster, praying there was some way I could summon someone who'd come to the aid of Betty and Hope and Rico.

I must have looked like a coward when I ran, and what was worse, I was. It was true. I was afraid. I was afraid for my friends, afraid for myself, afraid of what still could happen.

And then a man I hadn't seen yet, one they must have placed outside as lookout, slammed the diner door inward and into me. He picked me up and threw me through the window. I could feel darkness falling, and I knew it was already too late. . . .

Hulk woke up lying in street. Street was dirty and full of broken glass. Points on broken glass were sharp, so Hulk got up. Stupid man was standing over Hulk. Man yelled, and other men came. Men brought woman and girl and man with bloody nose. Woman was crying. Little girl looked afraid. Bloody man looked at Hulk.

Seeing little girl cry made Hulk feel bad. Made Hulk want to smash bad men who made her cry.

Man with bloody nose talked to Hulk. Bloody man called Hulk by stupid name Hulk didn't know. Hulk didn't know stupid man. Hulk didn't know men who were yelling. Hulk didn't like seeing woman cry.

Dumb bloody man called Hulk "Bruce."

Hulk hates name "Bruce." Bruce is name of puny Banner. Banner is Hulk's enemy. Banner wants to destroy Hulk. Banner is the one Hulk hates most of all.

If Hulk could catch puny Banner, Hulk would smash.

Other men came to talk to Hulk. Other men said Hulk was the strongest one there is. Hulk *is* the strongest one there is. Hulk hates men who talk too much. Hulk hates noise.

So puny men stopped talking. Gave Hulk food. Food was good. Hulk stayed with stupid, puny men with good food.

Man showed Hulk truck with boxes in back. Man asked Hulk to help take boxes out. Hulk lifted boxes because Hulk is strong. Hulk helped friends. Hulk threw boxes out of truck.

Stupid, puny boxes all smashed. Machines in boxes all were broken. Men were angry. Hulk did not care. Men wanted truck empty. Stupid truck was empty.

Puny fat man tried to yell at Hulk, so Hulk smashed him. Hulk's other friends stopped yelling.

Other people came, but Hulk's friend said new people were friends of Banner, so Hulk chased them away. Hulk's friends were very happy. Gave Hulk more to eat. Hulk's new friends were "pirates." Hulk's best friend was pirate king. Pirate king gave Hulk lots of food, kept other friends from making noise.

Hulk was happy.

Friends of puny Banner stayed away. Puny Banner stayed away. Banner stays away because Banner is afraid of Hulk.

Pirate king wanted Hulk to help. Pirate king wanted Hulk to fight friends of Banner. King wanted Hulk to smash many friends of Banner. But friends of Banner were hiding. Banner's friends were cowards. Cowards hid in big building with broken lights on top.

Hulk liked building. Building smelled like food. But coward friends of Banner hid inside, so Hulk smashed building wall. Hulk went inside.

Inside were only crying woman and little girl. Hulk did not see puny Banner. Hulk did not see Banner's friends.

Pirate king grabbed crying woman. Kissed woman's face. Woman tried to smash pirate, but woman was too puny. Pirate king laughed and hugged woman hard.

Little girl started to cry. Woman cried out, "Betty!" to little girl.

Betty. Hulk knows that name.

Hulk loves Betty. Betty is daughter of stupid Ross. Someday,

Hulk will smash Ross, but Betty is Hulk's friend. Hulk misses Betty.

Little girl did not look like Betty, but Hulk liked her. Hulk didn't like to see her cry. Hulk hates when Betty cries.

Pirate king tried to smash woman again, so Hulk smashed Pirate king.

Pirate king landed in street. Stupid king yelled and yelled, so Hulk followed him. Hulk wanted to punch stupid man to make yelling stop. Other pirates came to help stupid king.

One pirate had a gun. Hulk hates guns. Puny soldiers try to kill Hulk with guns. Hulk hate puny soldiers and Hulk hate stupid men. Pirate shot Hulk. Stupid bullets from gun annoy Hulk, so Hulk took gun away and smashed stupid man.

Bloody man came to help Hulk. Man tried to smash Hulk with truck. Bloody man saw truck coming. Bloody man yelled, so Hulk would hear. Hulk turned and saw truck. Truck hit Hulk. Truck smashed. Hulk wanted to smash stupid pirates, so Hulk took truck and threw truck at pirates. Stupid pirates ran away, but truck hit other trucks. Trucks were all parked together. Truck Hulk threw blew up. Other trucks blew up. Everything blew up.

Stupid pirates ran way.

Then, side of mountain where trucks blew up started to fall. Side of mountain fell in. Hulk saw big hole in mountain. Rocks fell and smashed bigger hole. Dust from stupid rocks made Hulk cough. Smoke from stupid fire made Hulk sneeze.

When Hulk was sneezing, Hulk's friends smashed stupid pirates. Put stupid pirates in jail. Then friends went to look at new hole. Hole was very large. Hole was shiny. Sun was shining into large, shiny hole. Light was bright. Stupid bright light hurt Hulk's eyes.

Hulk wanted to sleep. . . .

When I woke this time, it was to familiar, even friendly faces.

Knowing the Hulk's propensity for doing harm, often unwittingly, I was grateful for that friendliness. Hope explained that for the last five years, ever since Futility's economy had collapsed, Steve and his

cronies had run the town like their own private fiefdom. While they let some passersby drive through unmolested, they used brutality and threats to keep the rest of the people in line. They occasionally used phony detours and misplaced road signs to bring in gypsy trucks with rich cargo, to fill their coffers.

Now, thanks to the Hulk, the reign of terror was over. With the authorities on their way, and an investigation sure to be launched, Rico and Hope were only too anxious to help hustle me out of town. In contribution, Hope sacrificed her personal means of transportation: a decrepit, old motorcycle with a full tank of gas. One of her neighbors threw in some shoes that almost fit, and a long, leather overcoat.

There would be no more handouts from Rico. When the Hulk destroyed his rig, Rico Melvin lost everything he had ever had . . . and would no longer be needing. He, Hope, and Betty were going to become a family. A loving, happy, and, God willing, very prosperous family.

I was glad.

Memories of them would cheer me later, when the loneliness of my own life got to be too much.

With a final hug from the bride-to-be, a teary kiss from the sweetest child ever, and directions to the second best truck stop that Rico knew of firmly in my Velcro pocket, I said good-bye to Futility and hit the road.

HIDING

Nancy Holder & Christopher Golden

Illustration by Michael Avon Oeming

It was finally dawn. The sirens of ambulances departing the devastation screamed in the gridlock clutches of morning rush hour. Horns blared defensively in response. There was nowhere for the cars to go to get out of their way. The ambulance sirens only added to the frustration of commuters who wanted nothing more than to get on with their day. To get it over with, and it hadn't even started yet.

The ambulances weren't going anywhere fast.

Christianne Hauer knew that people died on their way to the hospital far too frequently in Manhattan, only because it took too long to get them there. It was one of the risks you took if you wanted to live in the Big Apple. It was one of the frustrations of trying to save lives there, too.

That was not why Mrs. Ingraham had died, though. Nope. That one was Christianne's fault, no matter what her former supervisors were willing to forgive.

As Christianne elbowed her way toward the ruins of what had once been valuable real estate, she was amazed to see commuters rushing past with little more than a fast glance at the destruction. The notion that mere blocks away, no one cared what had happened here, made everything around Christianne seem surreal, nightmarish.

She had often seen similar expressions of betrayal and disbelief on the faces of the dead and dying brought to the hospital: how could anyone laugh in the hallway; how could they talk about what to have for dinner; how could the hospital televisions dare show sitcoms? When a person's world changed forever, why didn't everyone else's?

Christianne shook her head to clear her thoughts. She wasn't a doctor anymore—those days were behind her. Dwelling on the past only served to distract her from her current task.

On the cable news channel New York One, the anchor woman had said St. Mark's Place looked like a bomb had gone off. Who were they kidding? It looked like somebody had called in an air strike and shelled the place back to the stone age. Little delis, a comic book

store, the Dojo restaurant, all in a little line of brownstones that had been there yesterday.

Just rubble now.

She kept to the silhouettes of the buildings, darting into a shaded threshold to avoid detection by mounted policemen. They weren't letting people in yet, even the building owners and store managers. As far as she knew, everyone had complied with the police department's order. But the shop was her livelihood, and Christianne had never been very good at doing what she was told.

She'd heard stories about the Hulk previous to this, mainly in the tabloids and gossipy talk shows. But this wasn't any tabloid report. This was New York City. It was her own life.

Some kind of mindless monster, that's what she'd read. But how horrible a monster must the Hulk be, that the government was willing to destroy so much in an attempt to capture him. And despite the best efforts of the New York state police, the National Guard, even the Army, he had escaped, leaving destruction in his wake.

So all this was, essentially, for nothing. As meaningless as Mrs. Ingraham's death.

Christianne stopped, and gasped. In the center of the block, her store, Blossoms, was still standing, but the windows were shattered and bricks had tumbled from the Dutch façade like so many Lego bricks. For a moment, she couldn't believe what she was seeing, just as she couldn't believe that her insurance company was insisting that the Hulk's rampage and the government's pursuit of him amounted to force majeure—an act of God—and they were therefore not obliged to reimburse her one cent for the damage.

Stepping over the yellow tape the fire department had used to cordon off the entrances to all the shops on the block, she kicked some charred boards and bricks out of her path and tried to fit the key in the lock. Her hand trembled and she had to hold her breath a moment to keep her emotions in check. Angrily she tried again, then realized the door had fallen off the hinges. She pushed her shoulder against the scorched wood and shoved hard.

As she wedged it open, more debris and overturned floral arrangements tumbled down to block the door's arc. Christianne squeezed in

and pushed the door back into place, more out of habit than any actual need to close it.

Christianne cursed under her breath as she surveyed the damage. She had left her medical career behind, abandoned it for a life of routine simplicity, surrounded by beauty. The shop had become not only her livelihood, but her life. Each meticulous arrangement brought her a tiny escape, put a little more distance from the pain in her heart when she thought about what had come before.

Now it was gone. Destroyed. There was nothing left for her now.

Christianne kicked broken glass and clumps of potting soil out of her way and crossed to the counter. Hundreds of flowers were strewn across the wet floor, a kaleidoscope of tainted beauty. She glanced up, realizing that the sprinklers had come on when the place had burst into flames.

Something moved in a darkened corner, and Christianne jumped, bringing her fists up in a self-defense posture she'd learned years earlier. But then she heard a soft mewling, and her hands dropped as she recognized the sound.

"Oh, Sonia," she whispered. "Poor girl."

Christianne picked her way carefully through the mess and reached down to lift up the store mascot, Sonia—a stray cat that had moved into the store when Christianne had, seventeen months ago. She didn't know how Sonia had survived, or how shell-shocked the poor thing must be, but she was absurdly glad to see her, and nuzzled her close.

She stood in the weak morning light, covered her face with her free hand, and leaned against the counter. Another dream shattered.

"Well, baby doll, I guess we just go home, right?" she said to the cat, feigning bravado. "Nothing for us to do here."

With a last glance that confirmed her suspicion that nothing else of value had survived, Christianne steeled herself to the despair she knew was coming, and moved toward the door. Where the outer wall had collapsed onto the sidewalk there was a huge pile of rubble. Rather than walk through the deadly trap that the front door had become, she tried her footing in the debris and began to walk over shattered glass and fallen bricks and beams and mortar.

Beneath her feet, something moved.

"Oh my God!" Christianne shouted, and stumbled forward to land sprawling on the sidewalk. The cat leapt from her arms and landed beside her, then cocked its head to stare at her.

Christianne stared in horror at the debris. It heaved once. Twice. The third and last time, a hand appeared from beneath a charred wooden beam.

A human hand.

Christianne's eyes went wide. Then the doctor she had once been took over, and she rushed forward, and began carefully pulling stone and brick, wood and glass away from the pile.

It was fully five minutes before she saw the side of his face—remarkably unmarked given that he was buried under a landslide of rubble. He did, however, have a long scratch on his cheek, wet and recent. Probably from a shard of glass that he'd slid against while buried in the rubble.

The man groaned again, and Christianne continued her work. It wasn't long before she uncovered his bare chest. A moment later, she breathed a sigh of relief to find that he had pants on. She assumed he was a homeless man, perhaps sleeping in the doorway of her shop, when the Hulk began his rampage.

As a former doctor, Christianne felt responsible for the man. As a human being, she felt doubly that his injuries were her responsibility. He had sought shelter from her, in some tangential way, and it had almost killed him.

It was crazy, she knew. But she couldn't help the way she felt. That had been her burden throughout life . . . which was why the memory of Mrs. Ingraham continued to haunt her.

"Hey," she said, gently shaking the man. "Anybody home in there?"

His body was mostly uncovered, but she didn't want to move him without trying to communicate with him first. No telling what kind of internal injuries he might have. She felt his body for breaks as best she could, and came up with nothing.

"Hello," she said, gently pulling down on his eyelids, trying to gauge the presence of a concussion or other head injury.

The man's eyes fluttered open.

"Please don't do that again," he said, his voice pitiful. "It's a very unpleasant sensation."

Christianne couldn't help it. She began to laugh. All the heartache of the past few hours came welling up in a kind of mad relief that this man was awake and alive at all, and able to utilize sardonic wit in the face of such catastrophe.

"I'm pleased you find my . . . situation so amusing, miss," the man said dryly. "Most people wouldn't find an explosion humorous."

"An explosion that used to be my livelihood," she said, trying to explain how much she needed to laugh. "You're buried in what was once my flower shop."

The man winced, as if in pain. When he looked up at her, she could see the pain was all inside him. In his heart.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Which she thought was an odd response. Not the words, but the tone. It was as though he were not lamenting her loss, but actually apologizing for it.

"Well, I'll wait for the Hulk or the president to apologize, but thanks for the sentiment," she said.

That seemed to bother him as well. And as she looked at him, despite the lack of a shirt, or shoes, or more-than-tattered pants, Christianne began to have doubts about her first assessment of him. He seemed more like a college professor than a homeless man. Not that there weren't homeless former professors, but this guy was different.

But if he wasn't homeless, then what was he? Who was he? The only answer that came to her immediately was this: he was a man in trouble; someone who needed help. Just as she'd once needed help, so desperately, and had nobody there to really catch her.

"I'm Christianne," she said. "Christianne Hauer."

The man looked at her oddly for a moment, and then smiled.

"Bruce Robertson," he said. "I'm a reporter. Been chasing the Hulk for a while. Looks like I found him . . . or he found me. Pleased to meet you, Miss Hauer."

"Christianne, please," she said, and looked at him doubtfully.

He raised an eyebrow, daring her to go on.

"You'll excuse me if I took you for homeless," she said. "But, well . . . what happened to your clothes?"

"It's a crazy story," he said, and smiled self-deprecatingly. "New York, you know? You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"I'll bet I would," she replied, but she wasn't so sure.

Still, there was just something about this man. He seemed sad, yes, but also intelligent and warm and genuine. Christianne sighed. Then she did something her mother would have killed her for. Christianne held out her hand and said, "Here, let me help you."

A short time later, she was making them both tea in her apartment on West Fourth Street.

"Do you take sugar?" Christianne called from the kitchen as she heard Bruce come out of the shower.

When he emerged from the hall, he was wearing Kevin's bathrobe, dark blue with maroon stripes, very Wall Street. It was one of many souvenirs of her recently failed relationship with a handsome investment broker who was clearly going places.

Although she'd been the one to officially end it, Kevin had been *leaving* since the day she quit medicine. He'd just never made it all the way to the door. It had been painfully obvious that he thought life with the owner of a flower shop wasn't upscale enough for him. He needed a trophy lover with a trophy career. He would never have left her if she'd still been a doctor.

Or maybe he would have. He had also gotten tired of the nightmares, of holding her as she awakened, gasping for breath the way Mrs. Ingraham had done. Tired of trying to break down the walls he said she'd built around herself.

"There's somebody in there," he had said, pointing accusingly at her head, "but I really don't think I'll ever get to meet her." He had not come by to get the things he'd left behind, and when Christianne had called to ask him his new address so she could send them over, a woman had answered and Christianne had hung up.

"Sugar?" she called again to the stranger.

He came into the kitchen. He was a slight man and he looked tired. He hung at the doorway as if waiting to be invited in and cocked his head. "No, thanks. Just the tea."

"I should probably make you some soup," she said.

He smiled faintly at her and moved to the kitchen table. The cat hopped onto the table beside his hand and mewed up at him. He gave her a pat and sighed. It was a bone-weary sigh, one that bespoke a history of despair and sorrow. Christianne recognized it from her own life, from her own repertoire of sounds and gestures and expressions.

They were kin, then, in some way. Some special club of people trying and failing to forget the past.

She set his tea cup down and sat across from him. She was still amazed that he had no more than a scratch on his cheek after the ordeal he'd been through.

"Are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital?" she asked. "Get checked out?"

Bruce shook his head. "I'm sure, but thanks. I have the feeling I already got checked out." He gazed at her. "Do you moonlight as an EMT?"

"A paramedic? Well, I used to do . . . something like that."

He regarded her, drinking his tea as if he expected her to fill in some more blanks. But she said nothing, using the cat as a distraction as Sonia wandered over to her. "How are you, baby? Looking none the worse for wear." She turned to her bedraggled guest. "Which is amazing. When she first came to me, she had a tibfib fracture—"

She stopped herself and gave the cat another pat. Having this man in her apartment made her nervous. It also made her realize that Kevin was right; there were walls around her, very thick, very well constructed.

And then Bruce said something that surprised her: "Did you pin it?"

She nodded and said, feeling rude and nosy, "Do you moonlight as a veterinarian?"

"I used to do . . . something like that."

Christianne smiled. So he had walls, too.

She drained her cup. She was shaky from weariness and unexpressed grief. The enormity of her predicament rushed over her; not only did she still have her med school loans to pay back, but she was also

carrying a loan on the business that she'd managed to land only through relentlessly pressuring the loan officer of a new startup savings bank. Now she had no income, no possibility of reopening the store, and she owed tens of thousands of dollars. It amazed her now that she'd been gutsy enough to start her own business after the debacle of her short medical career. Well, doctors were supposed to have huge egos, weren't they?

Only, she wasn't a doctor any longer.

"I'm sorry about your store," Bruce said again; and again, she was intrigued.

"Thanks." She looked around the kitchen, half-stood, then laughed harshly as she sat back down. There was nothing that needed doing except to wash two coffee cups. "I'm not used to sitting around doing nothing, I guess. When you're self-employed, you're always on the run. I guess you'd know that, being a reporter."

"On the run," he repeated, and his smile told of an irony, a secret she knew she would never share. "I know how that is."

Bruce set down his cup. "Well, thanks for the tea. I—"

The phone rang. Christianne leaned back in her chair and snagged the portable off the kitchen counter. It was Nick Daniels, who had the shop next to hers. He sold stained glass and knickknacks. He'd hinted about going out for a coffee a few times, but she'd kept her distance. She'd told herself it was because of Kevin, but it hadn't been. It had been because of her.

"Chris, oh, my God," he said now. "I'm on my cell phone. I'm at the hospital. Isabelle's dying."

"What?" she asked, suddenly numb. "What hospital?"

Isabelle Tyree owned the store on the other side of Nick. She sold antiquarian books and prints. She was young and shrewd and filled with life. Christianne didn't know her very well. But of late, she didn't know anyone in her life very well.

"St. Michael's. Burn unit. It's insane here, Chris. So many people. They found her behind a fallen bookcase. Chris, she was . . ." He let out a gasp. "I had to identify her. I couldn't because she was so . . . she was like a nightmare. I'll never forget what I saw. Those army maniacs murdered her. Or that monster did."

Christianne tried to say something, but the shock was too great. She had seen people who had burned to death. She had seen people about to die from horrible burns, as well. Listened to their shrieks of agony. Watched their skin flake off as they whimpered for relief from the pain; the hideous, awful pain. . . .

St. Michael's was the hospital where she had practiced. It was where Mrs. Ingraham had died.

Christianne stared at the man seated across from her and tried to do something, anything. All she could do was stare at him.

"Chris?" Daniels said through the telephone receiver. "Chris, can you hear me?"

As Bruce looked back at her, she finally began to regain her balance. She lifted her chin.

"What are they doing for her?" she asked Daniels, her mind clicking into doctor mode, hungry for data, preparing to make a battery of decisions.

Only she wasn't very good at that, was she?

She ignored the little voice in her mind and asked in a rapid-fire burst, "What percentage of the body surface area? Are they full thickness burns? Is she receiving adequate fluids?"

Suddenly, Sonia swatted at Bruce's tea cup. It sailed to the floor and crashed into a dozen brittle shards. The cat prepared to launch herself after it, but the man stopped her by catching her in mid-flight. Sonia yowled in frustration and tried to scratch him. He held her gently.

"I don't know," Daniels replied miserably over the phone. "They told me she's probably not going to make it. But they're so busy. Maybe they aren't giving her enough attention."

In the back of Christianne's mind, the doctor she'd once been and the friend and good neighbor she'd always tried to be screamed at her to call a cab and go to St. Michael's.

Then there was another voice. *Back to St. Michael's?* it said. *Why, so you can kill another patient?*

When she didn't respond, Daniels prodded anxiously. "Chris? Chris?" he said.

She began to shake.

"I . . . I . . ."

She put her hand to her head, suddenly very dizzy.

Carrying the cat, Bruce rose and came around to her side of the table. He took the phone from her hand and put it to his ear.

"Hello?" he said gently. "I'm a friend of Christianne's. Tell me what you told her." He listened. He went white. Softly, almost too softly for Christianne to hear him, he murmured, "What was the cause of the fire? Yes, I know he was there. But was the fire a result of the military bombardment or something the Hulk did?"

As she struggled to compose herself, Christianne watched Bruce. The angry cut across his face gave him a sinister look that belied the gentleness of his voice as he probed for answers. She had no idea why it would matter to him if Isabelle was dying because of something the government did, or if it was the Hulk's fault. And then she remembered that he was a reporter, and for a moment she flashed with anger. He didn't really care who had mortally wounded Isabelle. He wanted to know because it was his job to know.

Then he said, "That's called a pulmonary contusion," to Nick on the phone, as if he were explaining something. "From when the bookcase fell on top of her. What's the condition of her cervical spine?" He was asking good questions about a tragic diagnosis. She remembered his question about Sonia's tibfib fracture, and frowned.

Who the heck was this guy, really? It was possible he'd once been a medical reporter, or something. But he knew way more about medicine than any average citizen.

"Thanks. Please keep us informed," Bruce added, and hung up the phone. As he looked at Christianne, there were rings beneath his eyes and ashen shadows on his forehead and his cheeks.

"I hope you don't mind my butting in," he said. "You looked like you could use some backup."

"No," she said. "I mean, yes. Yes, thanks for that. The whole thing has me pretty shaken, actually. I didn't know Isabelle well, but we were sort of neighbors. Our shops, I mean."

They looked at each other in silence a moment. Then Bruce said, "All we can do now is wait."

Christianne lowered her forehead into her hands. Her shoulders heaved. But she did not cry.

He said, "I should go." He couldn't have known that she was thinking the same thing: that she should go and help. They needed her at St. Michael's.

"No," she whispered, too low for him to hear. She heard his movements through the kitchen, Sonia's sad meow. It didn't matter in the least if he stayed or went. It wouldn't change a thing.

But for some reason, she didn't want Bruce to leave yet. Maybe it was her odd belief that they shared something.

"Stay," she said. "Just awhile. One more cup of tea."

Bruce nodded, and rose from the table to pour himself another cup. Christianne held out her own cup, even though it was nearly full. He refreshed it for her and then sat back down at the table. They both took a sip, almost like a salute.

"St. Michael's has a good burn unit," she said after a long silence.

"Yes." He nodded. He looked down at the table. "But I wouldn't get my hopes up, Chris."

So she was Chris, now, was she?

"Are you a physician?" she asked him. "With the government? Were you there because, I don't know, are they trying to figure out a way to tranquilize it?"

"It." The man sighed. "What do you know about him?"

She shook her head. "Only that *he's* a monster, and extremely dangerous. That destruction like this follows wherever he goes. He's killed hundreds of innocent people." She ducked her head, filled with guilt. *One, or hundreds,* she thought. *What was the difference?*

The phone rang. Bruce glanced at Christianne and she nodded her permission. He answered. Said simply, "I'm sorry, yes, there won't be any deliveries today."

"That was José, your delivery guy," he told her.

"Oh, wow, I forgot about that. There are a lot of calls I should make."

Bruce smiled again, handed her the phone and stood.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'll go try on those clothes you laid out for me."

More of Kevin's things. She nodded, wondering if after he dressed, he would leave. And if he'd send the clothes back, neatly dry cleaned, or keep them as she had insisted he do. They were no use to her, that was certain.

She made her calls, made more tea. Nick Daniels called again and told her that while others had died that day, Isabelle was hanging on. The doctors were surprised, and were beginning to hold out some hope for a recovery.

"She's trying to tell them something," Daniels added.

"Tell them what?" Christianne asked. "Who was responsible?"

Her glance ticked toward the doorway. Bruce was there, in Kevin's dark blue Harvard sweatshirt and a pair of gray sweats. He'd been too skinny for the blue jeans she'd offered, even with a belt. The cut on his cheek was the only evidence that he'd been in the same disaster that had almost claimed Isabelle's life.

"Maybe," Daniels said. "It's hard to say."

"I'll come down." The thought made her stomach lurch. She hadn't been inside St. Michael's for more than a year. A year, five months, and four days, to be precise.

"Wow, that's really nice of you," he said, sounding surprised. "But there's really nothing you can do. Her family's been notified. They're on their way in from upstate."

Nothing she could do. That was true.

Bruce hovered in the doorway. "She's better?"

"Apparently."

He straightened slightly, as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"That's great." Then he hesitated. "Did the Hulk do it?"

"She hasn't said yet." She looked at him askance. "Maybe if you go down there, you'll get an exclusive." Then, observing him, the growing pallor of his face, she said slowly, "Something's wrong with you."

"Yes." He gestured toward the window. Shadows were lengthening across the kitchen table. It would be dusk soon. "I have to go."

"Why? Do you turn into a werewolf when the sun goes down?" she asked, trying to smile.

"You don't really want an answer to that," he said sadly.

Looking uncomfortable, Bruce took a step backward. The cat began to approach him, then stopped, and growled at him.

The phone rang again. Distracted by Sonia's reaction, Christianne picked it up. "Yes?"

"It's Nick." His voice was low and agonized. "She's gone."

"What?"

"The nurse told me she sat straight up and said, 'The monster,' and then she collapsed and died."

"No," she whispered. "Oh, no."

"I've got to go. Her family's here and they want to talk to me."

"Tell them I'm sorry," she said, then remembered that they would have no idea who she was.

The man in Christianne's house moaned softly. She ticked her gaze toward him as she hung up. She said meanly, "Well, you've got your story. An official deathbed confession."

"It was the Hulk," Bruce said dully.

"No." She dropped her voice. "It was me. If I hadn't . . . I might have been in the ER when she came in . . ."

He looked at Christianne. "You're a doctor."

"I was," she said bitterly.

"And if you had been in the ER, you could have saved her?"

She said nothing.

"There are some people only God can save." His voice was hoarse.

"And how would you know?" she flared. "Do you know what it's like to make someone die? To know down to your very soul that if you had done things differently, they'd still be alive?"

Bruce stared at her for a moment. "Yes."

"Who are you?" she flung at him. "You come into my house, and you . . . you . . ." She burst into tears. "I killed her. I killed her."

Then she was against his chest, heaving hard, bitter sobs. "Mrs. Ingraham was in my care. So old. So feeble. I thought about ordering subcutaneous Heparin, but I figured, why drain the hospital even further? She probably didn't need it. Then she had a pulmonary embolus. Of course the clot reached her heart. Of course, she died."

Christianne could see out the window. Could see the sun disappearing, the light draining away like Isabelle's life.

Bruce held her. He said, "Clots are hard to detect."

"Which is why I should have ordered the Heparin." She lost herself in her guilt and misery, weeping in front of him when she had not been able to weep in front of Kevin.

After a time, Bruce said in a gentle voice, "The patient is the one with the disease."

"That's what they teach you in med school," she said, then paused, tried to pull away. She was shaken and sick that she had revealed her shame to him. "Not that you went, right? Whoever you really are."

"She was old. She might have had an embolus at any time. You should fight to get back your license," he went on.

"It wasn't revoked. I resigned."

There was a long silence. Bruce said thickly, "Hiding."

She lifted her head; he held it against his chest. "Don't."

"Don't . . . ?" she said, confused.

"Don't hide," he said. "Chris . . . Dr. Hauer, I know what's it like to be a . . . scientist . . . with incomplete knowledge that results in tragedy. But you can't live your life in fear."

She shut her eyes tight. "I don't live in fear." *Only with nightmares,* she thought.

" 'First, do no harm,' " he said. "By not practicing, you're harming people you could have saved. The people I . . . " he trailed off.

"They tried to use that rationale on me when I resigned." She shook her head. "It's over. I'll never hurt anybody again."

"*I* will." Bruce's voice sounded strained. "I can't stop running, Christianne. They'll never leave me alone, when all I want is peace, and the time to undo what uncontrolled science has done. As each day passes, I lose another piece of myself. I can't stop running.

"But you can.

"Don't run, doctor. It's a terrible way to live." His voice was muffled. "To exist."

"My shop—"

"Your refuge. You know that's what it was. Sanctuary. I have none. Fight back, Dr. Hauer. The only one hounding you because of

your mistakes is yourself. I hate to be cruel, but I don't have time to be gentle. Your self-pity is a luxury you can't afford. Neither can those who might have been your patients.

"Stop hiding, Christianne. Find the peace of mind that I will never have."

"Bruce," she said, frowning, "I don't understand. What are you hiding from? What are you running from?"

He laughed, and there was a kind of animal grunt in that laugh that frightened her a little. She glanced up to see the haunted look in his eyes.

"Myself," he said. "Same as you. Only I can never truly hide from what I've done." He pushed away from her and turned his back. "I'm sorry about your friend. Sorry about so many things. . . ."

And then he was gone out the front door.

Christianne stared after him, slowly coming to terms with what had happened. With who she had sat with and sipped tea with, and felt a kinship with. Christianne didn't understand everything Bruce had said. But in her heart she felt a profound and abiding grief for the man who had shown her only kindness.

And who had given her hope.

She went for her jacket, searched the apartment for her keys and pocketed them without thinking. Christianne slammed the door on her way out and started down the stairs, moving quickly. When she hit the street, she was running, eyes scanning for an available cab to take her to St. Michael's. They'd be nervous about letting her see patients, of course. There were rules. She'd have to be reevaluated.

But not tonight. Tonight she'd just be an extra set of hands. With the hospital overflowing, whoever was running the ER would be overjoyed to see her. They could work out the ramifications of it tomorrow. Tomorrow, after they'd saved as many lives as fate would allow.

Dr. Christianne Hauer was done hiding.

In the distance, sirens screamed.

HERE THERE BE DRAGONS

Sholly Fisch

Illustration by Grant Miehm

There was something in the air.

Old Sandor had hunted this jungle since he was a boy. His sons had learned to hunt here, and his grandson, too. After all these years, Sandor knew the jungle's sights and sounds better than those of his own home.

The birds were quiet. The air was still.

Something was wrong.

Sandor tightened his grip on the spear he carried. Its familiar heft comforted him as he crept through the dense undergrowth. As he slowly moved forward, he heard the sounds: Labored breathing. A deep, low growl. The slow grinding of teeth and unmistakable cracking of bones.

A lesser man might have turned back. But this was Old Sandor, who had hunted the fearsome serpent-beasts and lived to tell the tale. He felt no fear as he pushed aside the greenery to get a clear view of whatever beast might be feasting on the other side.

And that's when Old Sandor began to scream.

It had been too long since the Hulk had felt so at ease. He lay on his back, cushioning his head in his powerful hands, and listened to the relaxed sound of his own breathing. A cool breeze wafted across the grass—which was a shade darker than his emerald skin—and filled his nostrils with the pleasant scent of wildflowers. For once, he could enjoy the heat of the sun and the sounds about him, without fear of sudden interruptions by giant robots or Mandroids or gawky young soldiers comically struggling to maintain a grip on an anti-gamma blaster twice their size.

Yet, the Hulk reflected, the thing that truly made the day complete was the figure lightly dozing beside him. With a tenderness that belied his massive frame, he reached out a hand to stroke the arm of the woman he loved. Her golden hair caught the light of the afternoon sun, creating a perfect counterpoint to her pale-green skin.

She stirred at his touch.

"Mmmm . . . Bruce . . . ?" Jarella muttered sleepily. Though not fully awake, she shifted her body to curl up closer to him.

"Sshhh, love," his deep voice quietly rumbled. Jarella nodded and settled back to sleep.

How different it all is here on Jarella's world, the Hulk thought. *On Earth, I'm a mindless monster, endlessly hunted by the very people who fear me the most. But here, I'm a hero, the consort of Jarella, the queen of this subatomic world—the most beautiful, most loving woman I've ever met.*

Additionally, thanks to a spell woven by Jarella's royal sorcerers, the Hulk even possessed Bruce Banner's full intelligence—something he had never dared dream possible. Incredible power and limitless intellect—within the confines of this subatomic world, he could have the best of both.

And, he had to admit, it was far easier to fit in when everyone around him was green.

As he looked to the rich violet sky, the Hulk's thoughts drifted back to the people he had left behind when he had traveled to Jarella's world.

Rick Jones had a burgeoning music career these days, and from the rumors that sifted down through various channels, Rick had moved on from his partnership with Captain America and the Avengers to form some sort of connection to a new hero—Marvel or Mar-Vell or something like that.

And Betty Ross. Well, Betty was engaged now. Major Glenn Talbot would certainly make a better husband than someone who could turn into a rampaging beast at the drop of a hat.

True, the Hulk missed them, but they were best off without him.

With a start, the Hulk realized that Jarella was awake and quietly studying his face. His expression was far too serious.

"My love," she asked, "what are you thinking?"

The Hulk's dour expression softened. "Nothing, my dear." He smiled and reached out to lightly stroke her cheek. "I was just thinking how much I love you."

* * *

"Bah!"

The diminutive wizard fairly spat the word as he glared at the lovers far below. Robes swirling around his slight form, he turned away from the tower window.

"You take these things far too seriously, friend Moli," his fellow mage remarked. Seated in a battered wooden chair that stood beside an equally-battered wooden table, he smiled as his companion angrily stomped back and forth across the small room.

"Seriously, Holi?" Moli barked. "The traditions that have bound our people for countless generations? The sacred trust that we hold as Her Majesty's sorcerers regent? Yes, I take these things seriously! As *you* should, as well!"

Holi poured himself a drink from the flagon on the table and crossed his legs. "The Queen is yet a young woman, Moli, and deeply in love. Has it been so many years that you have forgotten the power of a youthful love?"

"The throne is ruled by *laws,* not affairs of the heart," Moli countered. "This 'Hulk' is an outlander! Are there no suitable young men upon this globe, that the Queen must take a consort from beyond the very boundaries of our world? Her choice reflects badly upon the entire populace."

Holi took a sip from the chalice he held, then wagged a finger at Moli. "Torla says—"

"Torla is blind!" Moli snapped. "Torla may be Senior Mage among our triad, but he suffers from an overabundance of gratitude. Ever since the Hulk overthrew Visis's plans of rebellion, Torla has looked to him to solve all our problems. If the Hulk and the Queen were to wed, Torla would—" his lips turned up in disgust "—dance a jig on their wedding day."

Holi took another sip of his drink. "If you feel so strongly," he said slowly, "then why did you help to cast the spell that taught the Hulk our language, that gave him the Banner-mind?"

Moli frowned. "We have all served Her Majesty well, and her mother before her. Even had I known the ultimate result, it was Her Majesty's wish. And Her Majesty's wishes must be obeyed."

"Then perhaps you should see all of this as Her Majesty's wish,

as well,'' Holi said. He smiled warmly as he rose to his feet and placed a hand upon his old comrade's shoulder. ''Queen Jarella has made her choice, friend Moli. There is nothing you can do about it.''

Moli's eyes narrowed. ''We shall see, friend Holi,'' he said quietly. ''We shall see. . . .''

It was almost an involuntary reflex as the assembled masses drew back. The Hulk had barely raised his voice, but there was no hiding its menacing tone.

''What do you mean, there's a 'problem'?''

Though the top of his head barely reached to the Hulk's expansive chest, Moli coolly kept his gaze fixed on the green behemoth's dark eyes. ''It is nothing personal, I assure you.'' He held up a scrap of parchment, darkly-colored and rolled into a tube-shape. ''It is a legal matter. My hands are tied.''

Seated on her throne, Jarella silently wished that Moli had chosen a better time for this confrontation. Mornings were reserved for petitioners. Jarella felt strongly that a queen must be accessible to the people she served—the line of subjects that stretched far beyond her receiving hall attested to her devotion to that principle. Each day, Jarella would listen attentively to a long list of requests and grievances. She had been in the midst of hearing a dispute over a mudgoat when Moli had interrupted.

Jarella scanned the hall. All eyes were focused on the green goliath and the diminutive mage. The queen noted curiosity and more than a little nervousness in the faces of her subjects.

''I am afraid the written tradition is quite specific regarding suitors to the queen,'' Moli was explaining. ''There are rules and conditions. In particular, there is a test.''

The Hulk eyed him suspiciously. ''A test?''

Moli nodded. ''To prove one is worthy.''

''And you don't think I'm worthy, is that it?'' the Hulk asked, clearly offended. ''Who *would* be 'worthier'? *You?*''

The aged wizard looked up at him with disdain. ''Don't be ridiculous.''

With an ingratiating air, Torla pushed his way between the two and

raised his hands. "Friend Moli, please see reason. The Hulk has saved our people from the giant Warthos. He defeated the mercenary hordes of the Ptill Pawob. He has proven his worth time and again—"

"Not in the prescribed way," Moli replied. He unrolled the ancient parchment. "The scriptures are quite clear: 'He who would wear the crown must first be proven worthy. Only he who has eradicated the menace of the Hellbeast may wed the queen.' "

"The . . . 'Hellbeast'?" The Hulk looked to Torla. "He can't be serious."

"It is true, friend Hulk—the traditions *do* specify such a thing," Torla said. "However, the Hellbeast is but a legend, a story told to frighten children."

"Would that were the case," Moli said grimly. He gestured to an elderly man who stood in the entryway to the hall. It was Old Sandor.

The hunter stepped forward. Holding his well-worn hat in his hands, he bowed before the queen. "Your Majesty," he said humbly, "I have seen it. It lives in the jungle—a terrible, hideous beast like none I have seen before! It is longer than the length of three men, and fiercer than an entire pack of Warthos! It has razor-sharp teeth the size of my arm, and claws like polished steel!"

A murmur ran through the crowd as Sandor continued. "I tried to fend it off with my spear, but it could not penetrate the monster's scaly hide." He lowered his gaze, unable to look Jarella in the eye. His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "I am ashamed to say the only reason I survived was that I fled."

Jarella smiled at the wizened hunter. "An act for which I am grateful, old one, otherwise you would not have been able to give us ample warning of the Hellbeast's existence."

Sandor's gaze rose back to Jarella. It was clear to see that he was surprised by her reponse. Slowly, he straightened his back and returned her smile. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Jarella nodded.

Old Sandor gestured toward the crowd. "Many here know me, Your Majesty, and can attest to my truthfulness. Had I not somehow outrun the beast, I would not be here today. The beast exists, and it must be destroyed."

The Hulk followed the sweep of Sandor's hand around the room. It was obvious that fear was quickly spreading among Jarella's assembled subjects. She needed to act.

Jarella rose to her feet to address the crowd.

"People of K'ai!" she announced. "You have heard the threat that faces our kingdom. There are few indeed who might have the strength and courage to destroy this beast. Truly, we are fortunate to have among us one who does!"

The Hulk frowned. *I don't like where this seems to be going . . .*

"Tonight," Jarella continued, "there shall be a banquet to celebrate the the fact that we shall soon be rid of this menace. Then, come the dawn, the Hulk shall go forth . . . to slay the Hellbeast!"

A change came over the crowd almost instantaneously. Fear and concern were clearly etched on the faces of most of the assembled subjects, but now the Hulk noticed the occasional look of awe and relief. As always, Jarella had known exactly what to say to defuse a touchy situation.

The Hulk turned to Jarella, who smiled sweetly. For a moment, the jade giant looked as though he might say something, but then seemed to think better of it. Silently, he smiled at the queen and nodded his acceptance of her decision.

Neither of them noticed the wicked grin playing across Moli's face.

Standing before a window in the queen's chambers that night, the Hulk stared out at the darkened countryside. Here and there, the light from a lamp or cooking fire dotted the landscape; all else was black.

The confrontation with Moli still troubled him. Could the wizard be right—was he unworthy of Jarella's love? And the hunt for this "Hellbeast"—something just didn't feel right about it.

Could there be more to Moli than just devotion to his queen? the Hulk thought. *I know he's just enforcing the laws, but there was something about the way he insisted I fight this monster of theirs that makes me think there might be some ulterior motive.* The jade giant frowned. *I wish I knew . . .*

The door behind him slowly opened. Tentatively, Jarella entered the room.

"My love?" she asked. "Is something amiss?"

Lost in thought, the Hulk grunted in reply.

Jarella crossed the room and rested a hand on the satin cloak that covered the green behemoth's broad back. "Our banquet guests have begun to wonder at your absence."

The Hulk shook his head to clear away the troubling thoughts. "Sorry. I've just been woolgathering."

Jarella's brow wrinkled in concern. "What is the matter? Is it tomorrow's hunt?"

"I suppose."

"But you are the mightiest warrior in this land, my love," Jarella said reassuringly. "You will surely triumph."

The jade giant turned to face her and smiled. "I appreciate the confidence, dear, but that's not the problem."

Jarella tilted her head to one side, her expression clearly one of confusion. "Then, what *is* the problem?"

The Hulk sighed. "Memory." He looked at the queen, saw she did not understand. "This whole matter would be much easier on *my* world. I'd just bellow 'Hulk smash!' and go pound the Hellbeast into dust. But here, with Bruce Banner's mind . . ."

He turned back to stare out the window. "You see, Jarella, there is another world out there, one you could barely imagine. That world has its own mindless beast—a beast who is constantly on the run from hunters. The only difference is that, on that world, the beast . . . is *me*."

His words seem to hang in the air for a long moment. The Hulk watched Jarella carefully, waiting for the look of horror he was certain would appear on her lovely features. Waiting for her to realize that she was in love with a monster.

"You are reluctant to slay the Hellbeast," Jarella slowly replied, "because it reminds you of . . . yourself?"

The Hulk turned to face her. "Basically."

Jarella burst into laughter.

The Hulk stared at her, uncertain of how to respond to that reaction.

Jarella wiped a tear of laughter from her cheek. "Your gentility is endearing, my love, but I am afraid that in this instance, it is mis-

placed. Your exterior may be gruff, that is true. But there is a good and gentle core underneath. The Hellbeast, on the other hand, is the stuff of nightmares. It is a vicious killer that threatens the lives and well-being of every creature in this realm.''

She reached up to cradle the jade giant's face in her delicate hands. ''The Hellbeast is an animal, my love. You are a *man.*''

The Hulk paused to consider her words. True, he had caused his own fair share of nightmares in people unfortunate enough to have crossed his path, but could Jarella be right?

If the Hellbeast really was the bestial, inhuman killer Jarella and her subjects said it was, then maybe that *did* make the difference between the monster and the Hulk. Maybe the Hellbeast was like a man-eating tiger or a killer shark—a conscienceless predator that would continue preying on humans until it was stopped. If destroying the creature was the only way to safeguard the lives of innocents, perhaps it was all for the best.

Then again, there were a great number of people back on Earth who felt the same way about the Hulk.

The Hulk shook his head to banish that thought. *Have to stop thinking that way,* he told himself. *Besides, if this is the only way for me to hold on to Jarella . . .*

''Maybe you're right,'' he offered tentatively.

Jarella smiled. ''Certainly, I am right.'' She stood on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek. ''Now, come. Our guests are waiting.''

Taking his hand, she led him to the vast hall where the banquet was in full swing. Song filled the air as boisterous guests enjoyed tankards of spiced ale and platters piled high with roasted meat.

Torla looked up from his cup to see the royal couple at the door. He jumped to his feet and joyously cried, ''All hail Queen Jarella! And all hail the slayer of the Hellbeast!''

The room responded in unison: ''*All hail the monster slayer! All hail the Hulk!*''

The green-skinned giant looked around in wonder at the cheering crowd. Dozens of hands clapped him on the shoulders and back as Jarella led him to the head table. He waded through the swarms of wellwishers and took his seat beside his queen.

The Hulk raised his cup in a silent toast to the crowd.
And forced himself to smile as their cheers washed over him.

The trees were a green-and-brown blur beneath him as the Hulk propelled himself across the jungle in a series of mighty leaps. He tried as best as he could to scan the area for signs of his prey, but the dense foliage hid most of the ground from view.

With an ear-shattering *thoom!* that shook the earth and sent frightened animals scurrying in all directions, the Hulk landed in the center of the jungle. His aerial search ended, he began hunting for the beast's trail on the ground.

Unfortunately, the Hulk had no idea of what he was supposed to be looking for. Bruce Banner's graduate training in physics had never provided him with any experience in tracking wild animals; neither had any of the Hulk's innumerable rampages. Truth be told, the jade giant was much more used to being the hunted, not the hunter. Still, if the Hellbeast was as large and noisy as its reputation dictated, it would probably leave a trail of destruction that even a novice could find.

"The Hellbeast," the Hulk chuckled. "It sounds like something out of an Edgar Rice Burroughs novel. Or maybe a Harlan Ellison story."

Making his way through the undergrowth, the Hulk could almost imagine he was back on Earth, stomping through a South American jungle . . . or at least the Florida Everglades. But the songs of the mossbugs and the purple crystals that grew wild here reminded him that this was unfamiliar territory. As confident as the Hulk was in his own power, a little caution seemed advisable.

Hours passed.

As the novelty of his curious surroundings waned, the Hulk found his thoughts turning back to the banquet. All those people, toasting and cheering him! Looking to him as their savior!

The Hulk grinned, his spirit buoyed by the memory. He drew the sword he wore on his hip—the same sword Jarella's father had carried in the Great Wars. It was a huge broadsword, designed to be wielded

with two hands; the Hulk only needed one. He tested the weight of the blade in his hand and swung it a few times for effect.

Perhaps he hadn't had much experience in playing the hero. But, he decided, he could get used to it.

It was another hour before he felt the tremors. At first, the green behemoth wondered if it might be a mild earthquake. But then he noted the steady rhythm with which the ground shook.

Something was walking nearby. Something big.

By listening to the booming footfalls, the Hulk was able to determine the direction from which the sounds emanated. As quietly as he could—given his own massive frame—the jade giant edged his way through the foliage. Moments later, he parted a mass of low-hanging fronds and came to a sudden halt as he caught sight of the object of his search.

"Old Sandor wasn't exaggerating," the Hulk murmured.

The creature stood in a small clearing. The size of a pair of tractor trailers on Earth, it was unlike anything the Hulk had ever seen before. Its thick, scaly hide had a reptilian look, but its four legs extended outward from its body, then down, like a spider's—if a spider's legs were three feet in diameter. Its eyes were large and round, wrapping around the edges of its dragonlike head. Jaws as wide as those of a Tyrannosaurus rex held two rows of menacing, yellowed fangs. At the other end of the creature, an imposing, spiked tail whipped back and forth through the humid air. The Hellbeast reeked of mold and brimstone . . . and death.

Now that he'd seen it, the Hulk understood why the creature was called the "Hellbeast." He couldn't think of another name that would be anywhere near as appropriate.

The creature's massive head swiveled toward the Hulk, its eyes blazing with apparent rage at the intrusion of the green-skinned hunter. The beast charged, a move which shook the Hulk from his reverie.

Launching himself forward, the Hulk sped like a missile to meet the Hellbeast's attack. As the monster snapped its teeth at him, the jade giant leaped over its head and landed on its thick neck. The Hulk smashed both fists down on the creature's head. The beast responded

with an inhuman roar, one that—to the Hulk—seemed to be a combination of pain and anger.

Before the green behemoth could gain a firm grip on the Hellbeast's neck, the monster shook its mighty head, sending him flying into the trunk of a nearby tree. The resulting crash of wood and green-tinted flesh against the jungle floor echoed for miles.

The Hulk staggered to his feet to find the Hellbeast bobbing warily from side to side upon its thick legs. It made no move to attack; rather, it remained where it was, closely watching the Hulk's every move. Its animal cunning took the jade giant by surprise.

It's studying me, the Hulk thought. *But for what reason?*

Suddenly, the Hellbeast's head shot forward, stopping a foot from the Hulk. He could feel its hot, fetid breath as it squealed, "*Wwwwwaaaaaaiiiiii!*"

Some sort of territorial cry, the Hulk thought. *Or a signal that it's going to attack again. Either way, I'm not in the mood to find out which it is.* He drew his sword and charged.

Before the Hulk could make use of his weapon, however, the Hellbeast whirled around with unexpected speed, its spiked tail catching the jade giant from the side. Sent wildly tumbling across the ground, the Hulk lost his grip on the sword. The blade flew from his hand and disappeared into the brush.

Slowly rising to his feet, the Hulk shook his head to clear it. *I think I know what my problem is. Back on Earth, I'd be fighting from instinct—when the Hulk is attacked, he reacts. But here, it's Bruce Banner's mind that controls the Hulk. I'm thinking too much, taking too much time to analyze my attack, and it's slowing me—*

As if in response to the Hulk's thoughts, the Hellbeast leapt forward and pounced upon the green behemoth, its titanic bulk crushing him into the hard ground.

"*Wwwwaaaaiiii!*" the creature shrieked.

For a moment, it seemed as though the Hulk had lost the battle.

But then, the Hellbeast began to rise as the Hulk staggered to his knees, then to his feet, using his powerful arms to lift the creature off his chest. Roaring almost as loudly as the monster, the jade giant threw

the Hellbeast across the clearing. Now, it was the creature's turn to go crashing to the ground.

As the Hellbeast struggled to regain its footing, the Hulk considered his next move.

I have to try fighting less directly, he thought, *try something that the Hellbeast wouldn't expect.* He flashed a wry smile as a plan took shape in his mind. *Maybe being an intelligent Hulk isn't such a handicap, after all.*

The Hulk leapt forward and hammered the Hellbeast with blows that would have leveled a concrete bunker. The beast was staggered by the onslaught.

With his opponent dazed and off-balance, the Hulk slammed a massive green foot into the jungle floor. The resulting shock waves could be felt for miles around as, beneath the Hellbeast, the ground suddenly split open. Before the creature could react, its footing was gone, lost to the yawning gap it stood above. The hole was only a few dozen yards long and about as deep, but that was enough for the Hulk's plan to work.

The beast tumbled into the small chasm, landing on its back. Its massive bulk, though useful in a fight, now worked against the creature, wedging the Hellbeast against the rocky sides of the fissure. The more the Hellbeast struggled, the tighter its prison became.

It was trapped.

Pleased with the success of his plan, the Hulk tromped through the surrounding brush in search of his sword. He found it a few minutes later, then strode back to the clearing. To his surprise, the Hellbeast had managed to get its head above the edge of the fissure.

"*Wwwaaaiiii,*" the creature softly moaned.

Raising the gleaming blade high above his head, the Hulk moved forward to deliver the killing stroke. But then, the jade giant came to a halt as he looked into the animal's eyes.

Was that a . . . tear?

The Hulk lowered his sword. Something was wrong here.

He stepped back to quickly review his battle with the Hellbeast: The way the creature seemed to size him up. The way it pinned him

to the ground. The fact that it had never used its teeth or claws while they fought. Even its strange cry: *Wwwaaaiii.*

The realization struck the Hulk in a blinding flash. Suddenly, it all made sense.

"Not wwwwaaaaiiii," the Hulk said. "*Why.*" He slowly stepped toward the creature. "You . . . can speak?"

The Hellbeast stared at its conqueror. The Hulk could see the tremendous effort that it required for the creature to work the muscles in its jaws and throat.

"*Yyyyeeeessss,*" it replied.

Night had fallen over the jungle. The Hulk and the Hellbeast sat beside a fire built by the jade giant after he had helped the creature free itself from the fissure. The Hulk quietly mulled over everything the Hellbeast had told him over the past few hours.

The Hellbeast was not a beast at all. It was a man . . . or rather, had been a man. A mystic curse forced him to wear the hideous form of a monster, shunned and feared by all. Ever since his transformation, he had hidden in the jungle, feeding upon the other animals to survive. All the creature really wanted was to be left alone.

The Hulk knew that sentiment all too well.

But now that he knew the truth, he was still faced with a dilemma. In order to remain with Jarella, he had to kill the Hellbeast; if he failed, he would lose her. And that would be too great a price to bear, even for the Hulk.

But could he kill someone trapped by the same sort of plight as Bruce Banner? Did he even have the right?

The Hulk looked across the fire at his monstrous companion.

And slowly smiled as an idea came to mind.

The following morning was the start of Market Day. By sunrise, the streets of the capital city were already packed as local merchants vied with those from the neighboring towns to hawk their wares. As usual, each vendor proclaimed their stock the finest in the land. The air was filled with exotic scents and the sounds of lively arguments as the bustling crowds of shoppers pushed past each other to haggle

over the prices of fruits and pots and articles of clothing. The streets were so clogged with people that there was scarcely room to breathe.

It was because of the size of the crowds that it took a while for anyone to notice what was happening. The hush started slowly, at the fringes of the marketplace, then quickly spread as more and more of the crowd caught sight of something they never expected to see.

The Hulk, the consort of the queen, was walking though the marketplace . . . with a monster at his side.

Despite the masses assembled, space appeared almost magically as the shoppers moved out of the way of the unlikely pair. The Hulk was impassive, looking neither right nor left as he strode toward the royal palace. His eyes were fixed upon his objective, and he paid no attention to the slack jaws and pale, silent faces that surrounded him.

Like the Hulk, the Hellbeast showed no sign of emotion as the villagers reacted fearfully to his presence. Unlike the Hulk, however, the creature held its head low and stared at the ground, as though ashamed.

Word of their approach reached the palace long before the duo arrived at its gates. Jarella rushed to the entrance to greet her beloved, her sorcerers close behind. In the courtyard, palace guards held their weapons in trembling hands, ready to defend Her Majesty against the horror that drew nearer with every step. Jarella's aides tried to rush the queen back inside for her own protection, but she would have none of it. She stood her ground.

The Hulk and the Hellbeast marched up to the gates with deliberate pace and stopped before the assembly. Behind the jade giant and the creature were an assembly of shoppers and vendors who had followed them from the marketplace.

Fear and bewilderment was etched into the face of everyone from the palace—everyone, that is, but Jarella, who wore a bemused smile. The Hulk and the Hellbeast bowed deeply before her.

"What is the meaning of this?" Moli demanded.

The Hulk ignored the sorcerer, his eyes locking with Jarella's. "Your Majesty," the jade giant said, "this is the Hellbeast." He turned to the creature. "Hellbeast, Queen Jarella."

"Charmed," Jarella said to the Hellbeast. She placed a delicate hand over her mouth to suppress a laugh.

Torla, looking concerned, stepped forward. "Friend Hulk, is this wise? Her Majesty's safety—"

"Her Majesty is perfectly safe, Torla," the Hulk replied. "The Hellbeast just wanted his side of the story to be told . . ."

The Hulk concluded his account to a sea of awestruck faces.

Torla stroked his chin thoughtfully. "The tale is difficult to believe, yet I must admit it explains a great deal. However, there is still one aspect that puzzles me. To cast such a spell would require a mage of considerable skill. To my knowledge, however, only Her Majesty's pantheon of sorcerers—Holi, Moli, and myself—are at such a level. Could it be that there exists another sorcerer within this realm whose power rivals our own?"

"There is no mystery," Moli said, matter-of-factly. "*I* created the beast."

Astonished, Torla gaped at his old friend. "*You* cast the spell that turned man into monster? But, *why*?"

Moli shrugged. "As I have said, the scriptures are quite specific. There must always be a Hellbeast. How else would the queen's suitors prove their worth?"

Shocked silence followed. For a moment, no one knew what to say.

Then, without warning, the Hellbeast shrieked in apparent anger and reared up on its hind legs. The palace guards swarmed around Jarella and, against her protests, hustled her toward the entryway. Its lethal claws extended, the creature lunged toward Moli. The mage looked unconcerned.

"Hold it! Hold it!" the Hulk shouted to the monster as he grabbed its tail to restrain it. "Don't do anything you'll regret!" The Hellbeast roared at him and tried pulling away. "I know you're angry, I know you want to kill him, but *think,* blast it! If he transformed you, that means he can *cure* you, too!"

That did the trick; the beast settled down. Once he was sure that the Hellbeast had regained its composure, the Hulk released his grip.

The jade giant turned to Moli. "You *will* cure him, *won't* you, Moli?" The heat from his angry stare was almost visible.

Moli smiled knowingly. "Certainly," he said in an accommodating tone.

The mage raised his arms and began performing a series of strange mystic gestures, which were accompanied by a chant in an ancient tongue. Smoke rose from the ground to shroud the Hellbeast.

When the smoke finally dissipated seconds later, the monster was gone. In its place stood a man who, realizing what had just occurred, joyfully wept for his returned humanity.

At least some *people can be freed of their monsters,* the Hulk thought ruefully.

Moli turned to the green behemoth. "You realize, of course, that you failed to slay the Hellbeast." He waited for his words to sink in. "As I've said, the scriptures are—"

"Quite specific," the Hulk interjected. "I know."

Moli smiled. "By failing in your quest, you have forfeited the possibility of your ever marrying the queen."

Now, it was the Hulk's turn to smile. "Not so fast," he said.

The mage's Chesire Cat-like grin began to waver. Clearly, the Hulk was not responding as Moli had expected.

"I believe your precious scriptures say that the task was to *'eradicate'* the menace of the Hellbeast," the Hulk said, "not necessarily kill it." He gestured toward the man who had once been a monster. "By having you remove the spell that created the Hellbeast, I'd say I eradicated the menace quite nicely. Therefore, I *didn't* fail in my quest."

The Hulk sidled up to Moli, his voice dropping to an almost conspiratorial whisper. "After all, I don't see any Hellbeasts around here. Do *you*?"

"But—but—" Moli stammered.

Jarella stepped forward to address the assembled masses. "As ruler of this land, I declare that the Hulk has succeeded in his quest! He has proven himself worthy to wed the queen!"

As the crowd exploded into cheers, Jarella turned to her beloved.

"Being the queen *does* have its advantages." She slyly winked at the jade giant.

As the two joyfully embraced, Jarella spoke softly into the Hulk's ear. "Two nights ago, you thought your intelligence to be a handicap, my love. But without it, you could never have arrived at so clever a solution.

"I love you for *all* you are—not just for your bravery and mettle, but for your quick wits and compassion, too. It is the sum of all these qualities that makes you the man you are . . . and the man I love."

The Hulk looked down at Jarella's beaming face. How had he ever deserved the love of a woman like this?

The Hulk smiled. There were no more hurdles to jump, no more obstacles to overcome. At last, they would be happy together.

At least for a short time . . .

A QUIET, NORMAL LIFE

Thomas Deja

Illustration by Jim Mooney & Andrew Pepoy

There are screams inside Bruce Banner's head—high, shrill claxon screams. Their piercing tones fill Bruce with alarm. He whirls around to see his father standing beside him. It's a Brian Banner from when Bruce was a child, a Brian Banner young and virile—

—and hate-filled and snarling and with hand raised—

—and the screams become softer, more feminine, and Bruce recognizes the screamer just as a brilliant green light flashes before him just as his father brings his hand down across Bruce's face just as the green radiance obliterates detail and form just as there's nothing left but colorsounddeathdespair—

Something soft hit Bruce in the face. He groggily batted away the offending object. Outside his bedroom window, birds sang, cars rushed by. Making an exaggerated show of yawning, he rolled over on his stomach and pretended to go back to sleep.

It had the desired effect. Betty climbed into the bed beside him and massaged his back, a practice she knew would get a reaction out of him.

"C'mon, sleepyhead, get up," she chided Bruce. "You know how hard it is to get the kids to school on time when their father's sleeping in every day?"

Bruce continued the ritual by groaning into his pillow. "What's the point of owning the company if you can't sleep in every once in a while?"

His wife's cool hands on his flesh felt heavenly. Bruce savored the sensation before glancing back at her. She was wearing jeans and a shimmery seafoam blouse that set off her eyes. As always, he was overwhelmed with amazement; this treasure, this stunning woman was married to him.

"It's time to start acting like a role model. Now out." Betty slapped him playfully before climbing off. Bruce pushed aside the lilac comforter and the sheets printed with little atoms (Betty's idea of a

joke engagement present; wasn't she surprised when he put them in the regular rotation?), slung his legs over the bed and got up.

"You, honey," Betty continued, "are on the verge of becoming a slacker." She shooed him toward the bathroom. "Now scoot—get dressed."

Bruce yawned and rubbed his sleep-crusted eyes. The room slowly came into focus. There was the mahogany armoire from his mother. Next to it was the curio cabinet featuring a collection of photos: Betty's father, General Thaddeus "Thunderbolt" Ross, looking stern in his military uniform; their wedding; their children, Adam and Jade; Bruce and his business partner, Kyle Richmond, cutting the ribbon on their new research facility; the toothpick "atomic reactor" a four-year-old Adam made for his birthday. Across the room was the antique kerosene lamp Bruce had given Betty on their first wedding anniversary—a reminder of how backwards he felt without her. And next to that . . .

. . . was the bathroom. Bruce half-walked, half-stumbled through the door.

Bruce stood in the shower. The water was warm and bracing against his skin, but it wasn't helping to wake him up; Bruce still felt half-asleep. Elements *(green)* of his dreams *(father)* kept surfacing *(screaming),* unwilling *(light)* to fade into the vault of his subconscious.

Betty laid out *(light)* his *(hand)* clothes for the *(warning)* day over the hamper. "After you went to bed, the Samsons called," she said, starting the ritual *(green)* list of things she needed him to remember while he showered and dressed. This was the only time he could concentrate on them, free from work concerns. "They've got some extra tickets for the Ailey and wanted to know if we'd come."

"Sounds like fun," Bruce *(screamed)* shouted over the water. "I've been a bit stressed lately."

"I figured it would be a good time to discuss Dad's retirement party."

Bruce *(raised)* shut off the water and reached for the *(light)* towel. As always, Betty was waiting, the desired item draped over one *(siren)*

arm. He dried himself off. "I can't believe ol' Thunderbolt is stepping down. When I worked for him, I thought he'd be military forever."

"Times change. The world's too peaceful for that old war-horse."

Bruce stepped from the shower, wrapping a towel around his midsection. Steam and *(light)* water vapor drifted through the room. He padded over to the sink, wiped the fog from the mirror. Bruce stared at his reflection and decided to was time to work out again; there was a hint of a double chin. Betty leaned against the doorjamb and smiled. Her arms were crossed over her chest.

"Do I look okay?" Bruce muttered.

"You look fine."

Bruce reached for his razor. "I don't know . . . I feel kind of funny."

Betty frowned. "Really. Come here."

She met him halfway and placed the back of her hand on his forehead. "You're not running a temperature."

Bruce grinned slyly. "Stay where you are long enough and I will."

She slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Stop. Maybe I should call Kyle—"

Bruce forced an unsteady smile. "It's probably nothing more than stress."

"In that case, get yourself dressed, Dr. Banner—Rick's waiting. I won't have Kyle complaining about waiting time overages."

"Let him complain. The owner of the company's allowed a few perks."

Betty smiled. Bruce felt his world lighten. "And what are some of the other perks?"

He drew her closer. She giggled, placing one hand on his chest.

"Let me show you," he whispered.

And what was left of the dream melted away.

Thaddeus Ross screams orders in his old military uniform and the large futuristic behemoths crawl past him with a serpentine slowness and they're coming after HIM and Thaddeus is calling for HIS head and the ratcheting of the wheels deafen HIM and HE brings HIS hands to his eyes, only HIS hand is gray—no, green—and Thaddeus

is ordering the machines to bring HIM down for the benefit of humanity and the barrels of these things are larger than HIS head and they're all aiming for HIM and this low rumble gets louder and louder as the bright green light rolls over Thaddeus, turning all the machines into blackened shadows and through it all comes a voice, clear as a bell, a voice that tears at his memories and all it says is, "Odd. . . ."

"You okay back there, buddy?"

Bruce snapped back into reality and rubbed his eyes. The sound of the car rushing along the highway, the sight of the ocean calmed him. In the rearview mirror, Bruce's chauffeur, Rick Jones, stared at him.

"I—I'm fine," Bruce stammered.

Rick shrugged. "Okay. It looked like you were having a seizure or something."

Bruce laughed, hoping it didn't sound false. "I must've gotten lost in my thoughts."

"Sure. By the way, I asked Mr. Sterns to assign you Jim Wilson while I'm on my honeymoon. He's a pal, and I'll make sure he takes care of you."

"I appreciate it."

"Hey, *I* appreciate the wedding gift, Doc," Rick said cheerfully. We would've never gone to the Caribbean on what *I* make."

"You deserve it for all your loyalty."

Bruce found Kyle in the usual place.

As Bruce's secretary, Patsy Walker, studiously ignored him, Kyle leaned over her desk, both hands close to the edge, trying another dodge to get her attention. Kyle was as out of place as a diamond in a litter box; his sharp suit and gleaming white shirt were at odds with Bruce's homey, utilitarian office.

"I can see you as a model," Kyle said in a voice that was meant to be sexy, but failed in every respect. "You certainly have the figure for it."

Patsy Walker continued typing, her face a model of impassive professionalism. "Thank you, Mr. Richmond."

"I'm friends with Elaine Ford—you know, of the Ford Agency? I could put in a good word."

Bruce shook his head. *He's practically lying down on her desk,* he thought. He walked up to the financier. "Hello, Kyle. Didn't expect you in today."

Kyle straightened up in a second, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles in his suit—the man's idea of misdirection.

A half-smile broke across Patsy's face. Not looking up, she said, "Good morning, Dr. Banner."

"Morning, Patsy."

"Hey, Bruce!" Kyle clapped him on the back while running his free hand through his hair—the high-priced cut already gone shaggy from neglect. "I was just paying a visit to my best friend, see what's shaking, find out what's going on with all those money-making projects we've talked about. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

Bruce retrieved his pile of message slips from the spike on Patsy's desk. He sorted them by priority, some returning to the spike, some finding their way into Bruce's breast pocket. "Not at all, Kyle. It *is* your money."

"So? What's up?"

"The Panacea Project. Norrin Radd's doing final calculations. We'll be running a test on the plasma gun systems today. If all goes well, you can promise the investors the world's first safe, relatively painless cancer radiation treatment within the year."

Kyle shook his head, beaming with pride. "Shoot, Bruce. Hiring you away from ol' 'Thunderbolt' was the best thing I ever did."

"Well, it *does* beat working on a better nuclear bomb."

"Ah, you don't regret a moment of it," Kyle said. "After all, you got Betty out of that awful job."

Bruce smiled. "I was going to check on Norrin's progress. Why don't you walk with me?"

"Sure."

Out of the corner of his eye, Bruce saw Patsy mouth her thanks.

The two men left the homey office and entered the dull metallic corridors of the main complex. Each panel in the walls was composed of a supercompressed alloy developed in concert with Stark Interna-

tional for strength and safety. Unfocused reflections followed their movements. The properties of the metal gave each reflection a ghoulish green tint that Bruce found disquieting.

"I'd like to submit a request with the FDA for human trials in the case of Dr. McCoy's gene therapy, Kyle," Bruce said. "That project's really coming along. Dr. Richards's unstable molecule development still needs work, though."

"That's great, Bruce." Kyle looked over his shoulder. "How's Patsy holding up under your schedule?"

Bruce rolled his eyes. *Here it comes.* "Really well, Kyle. That's why I hired her."

Kyle came to an abrupt halt, fully turning to gaze at Patsy. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I don't know, Bruce. She looks kind of worn out. I'm thinking maybe of taking her out to dinner, you know, as a morale booster. What do you think?"

Bruce suppressed the urge to laugh; it was the ninth time this month Kyle had tried this approach. "I think she's engaged, Kyle."

"Yeah, yeah." Kyle clapped Bruce on the back again. "I'm sorry, buddy, but I can't see that lasting." He motioned toward the redheaded object of his desire. "I mean, look at her—there's a real hellcat trapped in that secretary's body. Why would she want to marry some stuffy New England minister?"

"Because they're in love?"

"Whatever." Kyle consulted his Indiglo watch. "Oh, hey—I gotta make a call to Mishutsa before they close up shop. I'll catch you later."

"Sure, Kyle."

Bruce watched his friend bound off. Bruce smiled, wondering how he and Kyle could function so well as a team. Kyle was able to keep the money flowing, but his attention span was lacking. It was hard to get him excited about anything other than the latest woman to catch his eye.

He walked down the corridor toward the main lab. A buzzing in his ear bothered him like a rotted tooth. Bruce took a deep breath and counted backwards in an effort to focus beyond it; the Panacea Project needed his full attention today.

Bruce massaged his temples as he came to a halt in front of the mounted architectural drawings for the Banner solutions facility. The company logo—in italic Helvetica, with the top of the "B" serving as the circuit of a stylized atom—lay in the lower left-hand of the drawing.

Bruce frowned as he caught sight of his reflection on the casing. A flaw in the glass made him appear distorted and cruel.

Bruce's personal lab had been nicknamed "The Circus" by his staff early on. This didn't surprise him; the large circular chamber did resemble a high-tech big top. In the ring outside the staging area, controls and monitors allowed Bruce to observe and supervise everything safely. During full operations, the multicolored lights would cast strange shadows on the gray walls, making the solemn situations mock festive. Protecting Bruce and his assistants from the activity in the "center ring" was a five-inch-thick circumference of leaded glass set in an even thicker titanium/lead frame. For truly dangerous experiments, blinds could be lowered in front of the glass, and progress monitored by closed circuit television. Classical music was softly pumped through the speakers at the request of Norrin Radd, Bruce's head technician, and the lights were low to accommodate the man's pigmentless eyes.

Radd was busy with the plasma emission gun when Bruce arrived. The narrow, three-foot-long tube was surrounded by a bulky black housing that threw Norrin's milky white skin into sharp contrast. Connected to the gun by thick cables was the mini-reactor itself, ready to excite the isotope inside at the push of a button. A display on the side of the large, cylindrical reactor housing pulsed green, indicating that it was at half production. Later, when the mains were fired and the emission gun had loosed a stream of gamma-irradiated plasma, the reactor would be going at full power, any excess energy diverted into absorptive "lightning rods" placed at regular intervals around the main floor.

Bruce hit the intercom, interrupting Greig's *Aus Holberg Zeit.* "Norrin!"

Norrin Radd turned and, seeing his employer, waved. "Good morning, Dr. Banner."

"What's the prognosis?"

"The mains are in good condition and online. I have completed the repairs to the accelerator tune. The cooling system is operational. Once I have completed setting up the sensor array, we will be able to begin the tests within the half-hour."

"Good." Bruce made certain to keep eye contact with Norrin. The man was a sight to look at—hairless, skin tone nearly colorless, and with watery red eyes. But he was a good technician, and Bruce refused to lose him because the man might feel he was being pitied.

Norrin moved closer to the glass. "If the tests are successful, Dr. Banner, human trials will be possible within the quarter."

Bruce smiled. "I know one billionaire who'll be happy to hear that."

Norrin blinked. "Would you not be happy as well?"

"Just making light, Norrin. I'm going to make a few calls, but I'll see you back here in about . . . forty-five minutes?"

"That would be sufficient, Dr. Banner."

"Great. We're going to make history here."

A golden-skinned face framed by silver hair peers out at Banner through the center ring's shields, the green light coming after him and Rick before he throws Rick into a ditch—Rick looks so young—just as a pain like a thousand needles goes through Bruce with hurricane force and the light overtakes and blinds him—

Bruce felt himself being lifted to his feet as reality reasserted itself.

"Sweet Christmas, Dr. Banner. You okay?" asked a deep, male voice.

Bruce took a deep breath. His head throbbed. "I'm . . . fine, Luke. It's just overwork."

"Okay, Doc," replied security guard Luke Cage. "Maybe you better close your office door and get some rest."

The burly African American studied Bruce for a moment, as though

making certain that the scientist wasn't about to collapse again. Then, with a nod to Bruce, he headed off to continue his rounds.

Maybe he's right about resting, Bruce thought, as the sound of an explosion echoed in his skull.

Bruce entered to what was becoming a familiar sound.

"But my parents are flying in from—" Patsy was saying. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of Bruce approaching. "Look, I'll call you later. Love you, too, Daimon."

"Making long distance calls on company time, Patsy?" Bruce said playfully. He didn't break stride as he headed for his office, stopping only long enough to grab a handful of nuts from the tray on her desk.

Patsy smiled hesitantly. In one respect, Bruce agreed with Kyle: Patsy *could* be a model. "Sorry. *He* called *me,* Dr. Banner. Honest."

"I'm not too worried. I just hope he makes you as happy as Betty does me. Could you get Colonel Fury on the phone and set up a conference call between us and Tony Stark on that exploratory armor proposal?" He grabbed the doorknob to his office.

"Sure," Patsy replied as the door swung open. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Patsy get up. As he stepped inside, she called out, "But maybe you better wait until—"

The closing door muffled the rest of her suggestion. Bruce moved across the carpeted floor toward his desk. He crumpled up the message from Fury and tossed it in the wastepaper basket. As he passed the display case containing the design awards Banner Solutions had won over the years, he stopped abruptly, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end.

Someone was in here with him. He turned to face his visitor.

Brian Banner rose from the coach near the door. Bruce had walked right past him.

"Hello, son," Brian said. His voice was jovial but forced, the tone of a schoolyard bully made to play nice. His suit seemed tight around the shoulders. (*He's a bit larger than the last time I saw him,* Bruce thought.) The man scratched his jaw, which was already showing signs of five o'clock shadow, and extended a beefy hand.

"Your mother wanted to be here, but she had another one of her accidents," Brian said gruffly. "Slipped on some grease and banged herself up pretty bad on the stove. You know how clumsy she is." He chuckled hollowly.

Bruce stared at the man's outstretched hand. "Clumsy. Yes." His frigid gaze shifted to his father's face. "What are you doing here?"

Brian's eyes grew hard as he lowered his hand. "Your partner called. He thought it would be nice for your old man to be here when you test that cancer contraption today."

Bruce stepped over to his desk, searching for something, *anything,* to occupy himself with. He snatched up the time analysis for Dr. Richards's project and scanned the rows of calculations, trying to quell the red hot ball of anger igniting in his belly. "Well, you're a bit early for that. My head tech is putting the finishing touches on the set-up right now."

Brian gave his son a look that seemed to imply things would be different if he was in charge. "Yeah. The freak job with the eyes."

"He's an albino, father. Show some respect."

Brian's eyes narrowed; he laughed hollowly. "Sorry." He flashed an obviously false smile. "That Radd fella is good at what he does." He walked behind the desk and put his arm around his son's shoulders. Bruce instinctively flinched and moved away from his father. "Why don't you show your dad around, eh? You've never let me inside before."

With good reason, Bruce thought. He put down Richards's calculations and met his father's gaze. With difficulty, he forced the corners of his mouth upwards slightly. "Sure Dad . . . if that's what you want."

It all fell apart in Dr. Pym's lab.

The deterioration started almost immediately. As he led his father through Richards's work area, with its molecular recombinator and "dimensional rift viewport," Bruce felt his father's agitation growing. The brief conversation between Brian and Reed was full of abrupt sentences and thinly veiled hostility. Bruce kept silent, not willing to vent the anger and anxiety growing inside him.

When they reach's Dr. Pym's miniaturization project, Hank set them up by the electron microscopes. Brian kept himself stone-faced throughout most of Hank's presentation. Bruce did his best to keep things flowing, asking questions when things started to lag. The hum of machinery in adjacent labs acted as a constant undertone.

The inevitable outburst happened when Pym invited Brian to inspect a "Pym Particle" nucleus. Brian glowered at the man and sneered. "What do you take me for, a no-nothing rube?"

Bruce tamped down the immediate urge to flee. "Come on, father. It's time for the trials."

"What do you think we did back in New Mexico?" Brian bellowed at Pym. "Rubbed two sticks together in hopes of starting a fire?"

"I didn't mean it that way, Dr. Banner," Pym replied evenly.

"That's. Enough. Father," Bruce said through gritted teeth.

Brian spun to face his son. "Don't give me that! Did you think I would stand around goggle-eyed at your little scientific miracles?"

Bruce took his father's arm. "We can discuss this later."

"Afraid your flunky's gonna talk about how you disrespected your old man?"

"That's enough." Bruce felt his control of the situation slipping away.

"Don't you think I know why you're putting on this dog and pony show?" Brian growled. " 'Look at me, dad.' 'See how much a success I am, dad.' 'You're a *loser,* dad.' "

Bruce felt his anger rise, his face flushing bright red.

Brian got up from his stool and pushed Bruce away, either not knowing or not caring how much force he used. Bruce stumbled back, his rib cage glancing off the corner of a worktable—

And Bruce's vision suddenly turns green, not red with anger but green, the brightest shade he's ever seen and his anger is growing and growing, becoming so great it crushes his heart and boils over, hissing and blinding him—

Bruce felt his legs buckle. He fell to the—

* * *

Leonard, his friend and neighbor, rushes toward him in a ridiculous Flash Gordon outfit, his body a concrete slab of rock-hard muscles, shouting how he doesn't want to hurt him but he—

—glasses went skidding across the floor. A sharp pain in—

Leonard pushes Bruce into the side of a silo made of a highly polished metal. Bruce glimpses his reflection in its surface, but it's not him, it's a snarling Neanderthal monstrosity with a face knowing nothing but rage, and Bruce feels the anger grinding his bones to dust and banging at the interior of his skin, forcing it to expand like a balloon—

—and Luke Cage shouting at his father to stand down as Barbara Norris grabbed hold of the elder Banner—

—and they burst through the silo wall, and inside is a giant crystal cube so large it fills up the room. The thing glows from within. Bruce (no, not me, it can't be me) falls against the surface of the cube, cracking it and letting intense white light infuse the room, and the anger is threatening to rip open his skin like a wet paper bag because the anger must get out—

"Stand down, Mr. Banner! You will not get another warning!" Barbara Norris pushed away a lock of her frosty blonde hair and lifted Bruce to his feet. Luke Cage—one hand on the baton attached to the gun belt he wore—had situated himself in front of Brian. Barbara dusted Bruce off, her pale blue eyes keeping close watch on her partner.

Brian cleared his throat. "Never could own up to your petty side, could you?" he said to Bruce.

"Sir, you're not getting another warning," Luke said.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Banner," Barbara said to Bruce in a low tone, her Dakotan accent giving her voice a slightly nasal quality. "Talbot was manning the front gate, and he wasn't properly briefed on ad-

mission policies.'' She jerked a thumb toward Brian. ''You say the word and I'll *personally* escort him off-site.''

Bruce shook his head. The images he'd accumulated since waking up rattled around inside his skull like broken glass. ''It's okay, Barbara,'' he replied, maintaining the same secretive tone. ''He didn't hurt me. I just had a dizzy spell or something. Just overwork.''

Barbara looked at her boss, the expression on her sharp, Nordic face indicating she believed otherwise. ''If he gets out of hand, you let me know. It'll be a pleasure to bounce him to the curb.''

''Thanks.'' Bruce managed a crooked smile, then went to his father's side. Luke stepped back.

''Employing the Gestapo now, I see,'' Brian growled, glaring at Luke.

Bruce put his arm around his father's shoulder and started to lead him out of Pym's lab. ''It's time for the trials.''

Brian slapped his hand away.

The walk to the Circus was conducted in silence. Bruce caught glimpses of their reflections in the display cases. There was a sallowness around Brian's eyes, an almost imperceptible trembling in his right hand. Even though his father appeared larger, Bruce sensed it just concealed the truth: that this was in fact a shabby man made autumn-leaves-brittle with age, anger, and resentment. He focused on these details; it was the best way to keep him from noticing the strong family resemblance.

Norrin was warming up the controls. The dim lights made the monitor displays stand out. Brian ignored Norrin's greeting and drifted toward the observation window. His breath misted the glass.

Taking a position behind his technician, Bruce opened his mouth to reprimand his father, but memories of the altercation in Pym's lab intruded. Bruce ignored the impulse.

''We're going to need another hazmat rig,'' Bruce told Norrin, gesturing toward the two hazardous material suits that had been laid out as a precaution.

''Readings indicate we're at optimal safety at the moment, Doctor,'' said Norrin. ''Short of filtering goggles, no other precaution

should be necessary.'' He pointed to a pair of matte-black goggles near Bruce. The lenses were designed to minimize exposure to harmful rays.

Brian was outlined in the faint green glow of the emission tubing. ''Father, come sit here,'' said Bruce. ''Norrin, if you could please initiate main firing sequence. . . .''

Brian held his position. A reflection showed the older man's stony countenance, his lips pressed into a hard line. Bruce slipped on a pair of goggles and walked up to his father, holding out another pair.

''Please put these on, Dad. They'll protect you from the glare.''

''Main firing sequence initiated,'' Norrin announced as his fingers flashed across the keyboard. ''Plasma emission in thirty seconds.'' The gun began moving along the rails, translating Norrin's calculations into positioning and angles.

Bruce put a hand on his father's shoulder. ''You hear that, Dad?'' he asked, holding out the goggles. ''You've got to put these on or the discharge will damage your eyesight.''

''Get. Your. Hands. Off. Me.'' Brian's voice was low, the words not so much spoken, as growled. Recognizing that tone of voice, Bruce immediately pulled away his hand, as if shocked.

''What?'' Bruce said softly.

The gamma gun rotated in its housing, lining up the nozzle to the tissue sample below it.

''Plasma emissions in twenty-five seconds,'' Norrin said.

''You have the nerve to rub *this* in my face?'' Brian roared. He waved a hand toward the intricate machinery. ''Gamma radiation technology?''

Bruce drew in a sharp breath, and forced himself to ignore his father's dramatic gestures.

On a monitor to Norrin's right, power levels rose. The baffles around the gun's particle exciter swiveled shut.

''We're going to use it as a cancer therapy—'' Bruce began.

''Showing off your beautiful facility wasn't enough, was it?'' Brian glared at his son. ''You had to show me how *better* you were at harnessing gamma energy.''

Bruce suddenly felt ten years old, waiting for the dreaded moment

when his father would raise his hand. "T-that's not true, father. Now please, put on the goggles." He held out them out, eyes pleading with Brian to listen.

Brian knocked the glasses out of his hand.

"Plasma emission in twenty seconds," Norrin announced.

"A reminder of how I screwed up in Los Alamos, I bet," Brian continued. "You probably laughed at my research in the field."

"That's not true!"

A corona of green light played around the gun's nozzle.

"Maybe you're right, son," Brian said, far too calmly. "Maybe if I hadn't worked on that project, I wouldn't have absorbed all those rads. Maybe I wouldn't have been burdened with a scrawny, egg-headed *freak* like *you*!"

Brian raised his fist and advanced on his son. Bruce's arms instinctively went up as he backed away.

The whine from the gun changed pitch. The cables trembled slightly. "Plasma emission in fifteen seconds," said Norrin.

"Father, stop this!" Bruce pleaded. "We're both going to get—"

"Shut up!" Brian bellowed.

And then it all fell apart.

Norrin leapt from his chair, moving to interpose himself between father and son. The older man threw a punch and connected, hitting Bruce in the forearm. Bruce yelled out in shock and fear, then pushed back in the hopes of knocking his father away.

Brian stumbled, slipped on the tile floor. Norrin led Bruce away from his father, as the elder Banner tried to regain his balance . . .

. . . just as the plasma gun reached full firing strength.

Bruce saw his father totter like an unstable gyroscope before falling back and to the left . . . into the control panel keyboard.

"No!" Bruce shouted.

Time seemed to stretch into a yawning eternity.

Brian's elbow landed hard on the keyboard, punching a random set of buttons. The plasma gun, now glowing like a miniature green sun, shifted and revolved to accommodate the new coordinates. The whine of the excitor had become nails-on-chalkboard high, so loud it drowned out Brian's ranting.

Through the protective lenses of his goggles, Bruce saw the corona on the gun's nozzle flare. He lunged toward the switch that would activate the protective blinds, but Norrin had already pulled him too far away. A beam of the brightest green hue screamed out of the device, bore a hole in the slab of leaded glass not made to withstand direct application, and hit Brian squarely in the back.

"Dad!"

"Dr. Banner!" Norrin pushed his boss out into the hallway.

For one brief moment, Bruce caught sight of his father, an emerald glow suffusing his skin; his muscles and skeleton were now visible. Bruce stumbled out of The Circus, striking the far wall of the corridor.

The plasma gun began cycling down, its noise muffled by the thick walls. Norrin punched in the locking codes for the door.

"My God. . . ." Bruce said hoarsely.

"Dr. Banner, we need to notify Hazmat," Norrin said. "Our observation port has been breached. Your father is, at the very least, seriously ill; at worst, dead. We, also, have been exposed to gamma radiation. I need you to concentrate so we can get through this."

"But, the gun . . . it . . . my God. . . ." Bruce's voice trailed off as the hallway echoed with the sounds of Brian Banner pounding his fists against the locked door.

Barbara came running, gun unholstered. "What's the—"

She stopped, her attention drawn to the deep, booming noises coming from The Circus. She positioned herself next to Bruce, pistol in firing position.

With the next boom, sounding for all the world like God clearing his throat, the wall buckled. And something that might have been—*had* been—Brian Banner roared.

The pounding increased. Bruce's nightmares flickered before his eyes. "What have I done?" he whispered.

"Luke, get everyone down here—riot gear and all. Something's wrong," Barbara barked into her collar mike.

Whatever was on the other side of the wall bellowed once more. Suddenly, the wall exploded outwards in a shower of metal and glass shrapnel. A shard struck Barbara in the neck. She fell against the far wall, blood flowing down her shirt, eyes dimming.

Bruce threw his hands up to protect himself; his body felt like it was being stung by millions of wasps. Tiny fonts of warmth welled up all over his body, staining his clothes. His legs weakened and gave out. As he fell to the floor, Bruce saw a Jackson Pollack-like spatter of bright crimson (*mybloodI'mbleeding*) blossom through the thin fabric of his shirt. He hit the ground, glasses shattering, and glanced up.

His father—rather, what had once *been* his father—stepped through the gap in the wall of The Circus made by his mighty fists.

The gamma radiation had transformed him in some horrible way. Brian Banner's features were barely detectable, overlaid as they were with an ugly, Neanderthal cast. Tatters of his suit hung from his massive frame. Only the leather uppers of his shoes remained, riding the tops of the monster's enormous feet like some weird tribal anklets. The creature's skin, taut over a mass of overdeveloped muscles, was bright green.

Bruce saw its eyes focus on him. As the scientist tried to scramble away, the monster roared in rage. It stepped further into the corridor, screaming, "Crush bad boy! Bad boy must be punished!"

Bruce knew he should run, find cover, wait until Cage and the rest of the security staff arrived with guns to deal with this monster.

But Bruce could not move. He was paralyzed as the . . . *thing* reached out, grabbed him by the arm and raised one enormous hand—

The golden skinned man turned to the lattice on his right. The scientist's eyes were fluttering.

Bruce felt the air pressure increase as the hand arced down—

The scientist's frail body convulsed. His limbs slammed against the sides of the lattice, bruising elbows and knees.

Bruce's head snapped back, body numbed by the force of the blow.

The monster screamed, "Bad boy! Bad boy never listens! Bad boy never learns!"

* * *

The Cosmic Cube flared brightly. The scientist gulped air hungrily. His eyes—

Bruce screamed as his vision dimmed.

Bruce screamed as his vision clarified. He ached all over. He felt like he was floating on a blanket of air. Around him were walls of cloudy crystal. Flaws in the coffin-like construct distorted his view of the outside world; Bruce could only discern general shapes and colors around him.

A black, gold and silver smudge approached Bruce's prison with a deliberate slowness. ''Quite intriguing,'' it remarked bemusedly.

''Who's there?'' Bruce shouted. A cold ache ran through his limbs. Fear chilled his body.

''Allow me.'' The smudge raised one limb, the tip of which glowed white-hot, then dimmed.

The flaws in the crystalline prison instantly smoothed, allowing Bruce to see the gray haze beyond the smudge.

He was inside what appeared to be the Circus at Banner Solutions, though this version of the facility was dark and rusty and lacking any identifying marks. Crystal containers similar to his own ringed the room. Even in his hazy state, Bruce could identify the prisoners they contained.

Opposite Bruce was the Valkyrie—the tall, blonde Asgardian Chooser of the Slain—who, at times, went by the mortal name of Barbara Norris. To her right was Nighthawk, who, as millionaire Kyle Richmond, was the financier behind the Defenders. Turning his head, Bruce saw the milky-white body of Norrin Radd—the cosmic being now known as the Silver Surfer. Near what looked to be the leaded ring of The Circus was the redheaded former Avenger known as Hellcat, whose real identity was that of former professional model Patsy Walker. All of them had their eyes closed, blissful expressions on their faces as if each was dreaming the dream of a lifetime.

''I am amazed, Dr. Banner,'' the figure in the center of it all mused aloud. Bruce turned to look at him.

The man's muscles rippled beneath flesh the color of molten gold.

His eyes were devoid of pupils or irises, yet Bruce could not shake the impression that the figure was staring right through him. The eyes were the one thing that detracted from the figure's angular good looks. He appeared to be male, approximately in his mid-twenties, and wore a black legless leotard that might as well have been cut from the fabric of deepest space, with thousands of starry lights twinkling in reaction to his movements. Silvery gauntlets and a belt completed the ensemble. The overall effect was of a costume somewhere between that worn by an alien on *Star Trek* and one worn by a professional wrestler. The man held in his right hand a glowing cube, its walls seemingly made of the same substance as Bruce's prison.

Bruce pulled a name from out of the darkest recesses of his mind—the portion usually used only by his unwelcome body mate.

"Nebulon," Bruce said slowly.

The Celestial Man smiled beatifically. "Yes, Dr. Banner. I see you share some form of interface with your monstrous side."

"Wha-what are you doing in my facility? And where is my—" Bruce paused, then sadly shook his head. "No. My father is dead."

"Correct, Dr. Banner," said Nebulon. He pointed to the glowing cube. "Only in the confines of the Actualization Matrix created by the Cube is your father alive."

"Actualization. . . ." Bruce repeated. He looked around, confused. "But this is—"

"A nuclear research facility," Nebulon finished. "It was closed down after an accident caused by one Owen Reece. Your kind calls him the 'Molecule Man', if I am not mistaken."

"But . . . why am I here? Why are the Defenders—"

"The Defenders are here to help me refine the instrument of your salvation." Nebulon held up the cube. "You have heard of the Cosmic Cube, I trust?"

The light inside the cube increased in intensity. Echoes of a life he was leading moments earlier dragged on Bruce's thoughts. He squinted against the glare. "Some sort . . . of reality transformation mechanism."

"Correct, Dr. Banner," Nebulon replied in a tone that sounded as though he was addressing a child. "There is a similarity between

the energy signature of previous Cubes and that of the Molecule Man. So I came here, fashioned a prototype, and have been learning how to harness its powers ever since.''

''Why?''

Nebulon's brow furrowed. ''It is always 'why' with you humans, is it not? I want to save you from yourself, Dr. Banner. Humanity is falling into an abyss. You are all mired in the insignificant concerns of your own well being, generating petty jealousies and unsupported prejudices. You are dragging yourselves down, preventing your species from attaining your true potential. You need me to show you the Ludberite way. With a device like this, I can show you that way at record speeds.''

Nebulon stared at the ceiling, lost in his own personal rapture. Groggily, Bruce tested the walls of his cylindrical prison. They were solid, cold to the touch, and unyielding.

''Once the Cube gives up its mysteries to me,'' Nebulon continued, ''each man, woman and child will be submerged into an Actualization Matrix. They will get a taste of their true potential, see what they can achieve once they shake off the bonds of their mental poisons. And through experiencing that heart's desire, they will find solutions to make that matrix a reality. They will evolve, Doctor, into the beings they were always meant to be: true Ludberite ideals.''

''This, then . . . is reality, not . . . where I was,'' Bruce muttered, more to himself than the alien. ''I'm not married . . . no kids . . . no Banner Solutions.'' The memories of his illusionary life burned away, freeing his thoughts—

—and igniting a fire in the darkest recesses of Bruce Banner's brain, the portion of his mind he spent most of his adult life trying to deny. The animal portion.

''The house and the family and the ability to work your wonders are gone, Doctor Banner,'' Nebulon said. ''But the *potential* to retrieve them remains. Your ideal is obtainable—more obtainable than that of Mr. Richmond, who seemed to want nothing more than forgiveness from some dead mate of his.''

The fires inside Bruce burned bright jade, giving off sparks that

caused damaged DNA to glow. "You . . . threw my dreams in my face," he growled.

"I would not call it that, Dr. Banner."

Proteins split apart and reformed within the lanky scientist, triggering metabolic changes. The aqueous humer inside his eyes changed from brown to emerald. "*I* would!" he shouted. "I'm never going to achieve that respectability, that . . . satisfaction again. I'm going to spend the rest of my life as a hunted animal."

Nebulon raised the Cube. "It seems you are becoming out of hand, Doctor. With just a thought, I shall—"

Even as Nebulon spoke, something crawled out of Bruce Banner's lizard brain and took over. Muscles rippled and reconfigured. Bones distended and thickened to support flesh that had the consistency of plate armor. Cells replicated themselves rapidly to fill the vacuums inside a body made larger, stronger, deadlier.

And the intellect that was Bruce Banner went out like a light, so that the savage urges of the Hulk could come online.

And the Hulk roared.

The crystalline cage cracked, fractured, and flew apart in a shower of jagged pieces. A look of alarm crossed Nebulon's face; a sphere of yellowish energy surrounded him, deflecting the sparkling shrapnel. Shards flew across the room, piercing the prisons of the other Defenders. The beautiful randomness of each hero's crystal cage was marred with spider-webbed cracks. In response to the damage, each inhabitant stirred.

"Hulk knows you, Gold Man!" The behemoth advanced upon Nebulon.

"As well you should, brute." Nebulon raised the Cube once more. "What is *your* heart's desire?"

The Hulk rammed into Nebulon's protective sphere like a freight train, but could not penetrate it. The energy bubble rocked, knocking the Celestial Man off his feet. With another inarticulate bellow of rage, the green behemoth rained blows on the sphere wall. Nebulon winced and fired a blast of energy at his opponent as the sphere melted away.

"You never could understand the concept of superior beings, beast." Nebulon's barrage drove the Hulk backwards, step by painful

step. The alien increased the force of the blasts, slamming the Hulk into the wall behind him.

"Gold Man always uses big words," the jade giant said through gritted teeth. "Tries to make Hulk look stupid. But Hulk will make words stop!"

"Hulk can certainly try," Nebulon responded. The Cube flared brightly—

And the air suddenly filled with the overlapping shriek of breaking crystal. Nebulon spun around to see the Silver Surfer burst free of his container. Cosmic power flowed from his hands, shattering the already weakened remaining prisons and releasing the heroes within.

Biospheric energies were redirected to form another sphere to protect Nebulon from the coming onslaught.

Almost instantly, Nebulon felt a bone-crushing impact, and the sphere rolled toward the Surfer.

The space farer, now free of the crystalline structure, raised himself up, one hand extended. In a deep sonorous voice, he said, "Your goals may be admirable, Nebulon, but enlightenment can never come without freedom."

"Cripes, Surfer—blast now, moralize later!" gasped Nighthawk as he clawed free of his own container. The financier-turned-super hero leapt free. From the tips of the wing-like cape of his red-and-blue costume, small machine guns fired, the bullets bouncing off Nebulon's sphere. The energy bubble continued rolling across the floor until it collided with a steam release valve. Nebulon fell to the floor, his energy construct disappeared.

Nebulon shook his head, pushed the hair out of his face, and was met by the sight of the Hulk bearing down fast. The behemoth's hands, large as hamhocks, were balled into fists. His face was so contorted with rage and anger that it was clear that, upon seeing it, the Celestial Man feared for his life. The Hulk's compatriots took up the rear, positioning themselves so that the Hulk had plenty of space.

The Celestial Man never saw the long, shapely leg of the Valkyrie kick out and send him sprawling. He did, however, catch a glimpse of the Cube spinning up and away from him.

The Valkyrie—tall, statuesque, dressed in black and steel and blue,

her icy blonde hair done up in braids that fell down her back—interposed herself between Nebulon and the Hulk.

"You have forfeited the right to wield such power," she told Nebulon with the finality of death itself.

"Somebody find the cube!" Nighthawk shouted.

"I'll handle that," replied Hellcat, her lithe form leaping onto the long-dead machinery around them.

"Hulk smash Gold Man!" the behemoth bellowed as he drew closer.

Valkyrie turned, waving her arms in an effort to ward off the jade giant. "No, Hulk! We must capture—"

Tapping into the biospheric energies that empowered him, the Celestial Man blasted the Valkyrie who, caught unawares, was lifted off her feet and into the Hulk. The green giant swatted his teammate away and continued his advance. Closing in on his adversary, the Hulk raised his massive fists and brought them crashing down . . . on the spot where, just a moment before, Nebulon had been standing.

The Celestial Man had teleported out of harm's way. With his powers, he could be halfway around the world in the blink of an eye.

There was a long silence. Then:

"Where Gold Man go?" the Hulk muttered, confused.

Nighthawk groaned. "Great. *Exactly* how I planned it."

"It would be wise to focus our attentions on locating the Cosmic Cube, my friend," advised the Surfer as he scanned the room. "It must never be used by mortals again."

From her high perch, Hellcat pointed to a spot in a far corner. "Hey, there it is!"

The Cube was closest to where the Hulk was standing.

The behemoth picked it up. The object, capable of warping time and space with a thought, almost disappeared in the monster's large, powerful hand.

Its creator no longer within range, the Cube reverted to its last programmed response: It sent telepathic tendrils deep inside the Hulk's brain, trolling its surface until it found his greatest desire. Mental energies interacted with the unearthly device, moving molecules about like pinballs to shape an appropriate reality—

* * *

The populace of the city was out in force for Jarella and her husband this morning. On either side of the Hulk, cheers of adulation rose up, hailing him as a hero. People spilled out over the rough-hewn stone balustrades, hoping to catch a glimpse of the greatest hunter on the planet.

The Hulk yearned to get off his riding animal and leap toward the sky, but Jarella would not approve. Later, when they were in the woods proper, she would let him travel his way, without the smelly creature beneath him.

Jarella waved to the teeming masses and—

Jarella being attacked by a blue robot.

—turned to her husband. ''They all love you, darling—''

Stupid blue robot crushing Jarella with building, breaking her, SMASHING her

''—as do I.'' She reached out and touched the Hulk's cheek. Her skin was cool against his. Up ahead, the city gates swung open for them—

Hulk picking up Jarella. Why is she not moving? Why does red leak from her?

—and beyond that stood a forest of the purest **(red)** *green, a world where the Hulk* **(bloodblood)** *truly belonged. No more Banner, no more men with guns, just Jarella and Hulk and peace—*

Hulk with Defenders, crying when told that—

''Jarella is dead,'' the Hulk muttered. ''Toy is stupid.''

The other Defenders had been standing around their comrade, holding their collective breath. For a minute, the Hulk had stood there, Cube in hand, still save for a stray twitch.

The Surfer approached. He held out his hand. "Friend Hulk, let me have the Cube—"

"Stupid toy," the Hulk repeated, anger creeping into his rumble of a voice. "Doesn't know Jarella is dead."

The Hulk's fingers tightened on the device. With a sound like a thousand rifle shots being fired, the Cube shattered, letting loose a wash of too-bright light. The energy moved outwards, bathing each of the Defenders in its power. They all felt something akin to butterfly wings brushing against their skin, felt a shift in their perceptions—

Mindy, I'm so sorry—
—we go into battle, sisters—
—for this is the true paradise, beloved—
—Daimon—

—before the light dimmed, leaving them to lead the lives they always had.

The heroes stood still for a moment as echoes of memories they should never have had melted away. They moved forward with a somnambulist's grace, avoiding each other's gazes, keeping their thoughts private. The tension in the air vibrated around them.

"There's gotta be a way out of her," ventured Hellcat. "I'll look for it."

"Good idea, Patsy," Nighthawk mumbled. "Val, you and Surfer should check the grounds for any other presents Nebby might have left behind."

There was sound of a thousand tiny marbles hitting the hard floor and skittering away. Nighthawk turned to see the dust of the Cube slipping through the Hulk's massive fingers.

The creature stood, head bowed, eyes closed. Nighthawk held his breath; there was always the danger that this experience might send the Hulk into another tantrum.

"Hulk want to go home, Birdnose," the jade giant finally said.

"Sure thing, Big Green," Nighthawk replied.

Valkyrie put a cautious arm around the Hulk's shoulders. She whis-

pered in his ear and guided him toward Nighthawk. The Hulk's face was lined with sadness—a sight so rare Nighthawk blinked in surprise.

"We'll take care of you, big guy," Nighthawk assured the Hulk. "You're safe now."

She watched them leave in the sleek rocket plane parked outside the facility. Bruce was wearing his angry skin, the one that he used to express his hostilities to the world. She knew Bruce didn't think she understood how he and the Hulk were one and the same. But Bruce didn't realize that a wife knows everything about her husband, even the secrets he keeps from himself.

She waved, her bright green skin standing out in contrast to the snow-flecked cliff face. Her thoughts were of calling Leonard back and finalizing plans for that outing to the Alvin Ailey performance.

Betty Banner pushed back a stray lock of her blonde-streaked brunette hair and went back into the house.

When she faded away, returning to Bruce Banner's subconscious, she didn't feel a thing.

A GREEN SNAKE IN PARADISE

Steve Lyons

Illustration by Ernie Colón

Ferocious rain sliced into his skin like a billion cold needles. Hailstones spat in his eyes and mouth. Lightning was drawn to his thick hide in continual whipcracks of torment. His tremendous lungs bellowed out anger and hurt, but the sound was stolen by a sadistic wind. He was thigh-deep in frigid water, mud tugging at his feet to steal his balance. He could feel the concern of the ever-present Triad. They wanted him to leave: he knew this, though he could not comprehend their words.

But still, the Hulk fought on.

"He will not surrender," wailed Guardian, the first of the Triad, in a soft voice that might once have belonged to Rebecca Banner. She hovered before the eyes of the Hulk, attempting in vain to gain his attention.

"Why should he?" The demonic Goblin possessed the harsh, guttural snarl of Brian Banner. "He's not been beaten yet!"

"He does not understand," mused Glow, and his voice was harder to describe. It was the voice of reason; that which speaks thoughts in the back of your mind. It issued forth, like telepathy, from the form of a translucent star—an image of light from a childhood lost to the dark. "In this current savage form, he lacks the intelligence to know that he has pitted himself against the very elements. He knows not what assails him, nor why brute force is ineffective against it."

"He will only cause himself further pain," said Guardian. "Is there naught we can do to bring an end to it, Glow?"

"He is not yet ready to hear our voices. Still, the Hulk is aware of our feelings on the matter. He will soon tire of this world, and then the failsafe spell will activate to remove him from it."

"Oh, yeah?" scoffed Goblin. "Ol' Greenface ain't so stupid, you know. He knows what's waiting for him when he does leave here—and he's in no hurry to return to that place if he can help it!"

As if sensing this dilemma, the Hulk roared again. But the roars of nature were far louder.

* * *

The Crossroads. At which all paths ended.

The Hulk sagged to his knees, water flowing in rivulets down his heaving body, misery aching in his breast. His own discontent with the world of storms had triggered his return to a place that he had come to loathe. Was he doomed to always find himself transported back to this benighted domain? This nexus of possibilities, which had somehow become a solitary prison? The familiar signpost seemed to taunt him, twisted arms sprouting from its fleshy morass to point him toward beckoning portals and their false promises. He could stand it no longer, but his sole recourse was to toss back his head and to scream his burning question to the black, silent skies.

"Why? Why?!"

No answer came to the impassioned plea, and the mere effort of voicing it exhausted his scant remaining energy. The Hulk's power of speech, such as it was, had only recently and partially returned to him; the concept of language made his head hurt. Confused, embittered and lonely, he rolled himself into a fetal ball and closed his eyes.

Still, he could feel the benign presence of the star above him. Its Glow comforted him. He reached out with surprising tenderness and drew the golden rag doll, his Guardian, to his side. She cast aside her bow and arrow and rested her head on his chest. Her gentle smile suffused him with well-being. But the mocking Goblin still lurked in the dark corners of his consciousness.

He drifted into a restless sleep.

"It is a punishment most cruel," complained Guardian.

"It was not intended to be such," said Glow. "With the sacrifice of Bruce Banner, the Hulk had become uncontrollable. He was a danger to all life upon his world. The heroes of Earth had no choice but to exile him. They thought it a mercy, at the time."

"They were afraid of him!" Goblin boasted.

"Perhaps," said Glow, "but they wished him no ill. Many are the realms to which the Crossroads offer access. The heroes hoped that, in one of them, the Hulk might find contentment. If he chooses wrong, however, the failsafe spell exists to provide him with another chance."

"And yet, unwittingly, they have created this awful cycle," said

Guardian. "The Hulk is returned to the Crossroads time and again, until the very sight of it demoralizes him. He begins to wonder how he can ever escape from it."

"That is why we have been summoned," said Glow. "From the furthest depths of the Hulk's being, Bruce Banner senses his alter-ego's plight. He has reawakened we three aspects of his own buried persona—his reason, his sense of self-preservation and his anger—to help bring a measure of peace to the Hulk's troubled existence and, perhaps, to guide Banner himself back to the light."

"Perhaps," said Guardian, looking down upon the slumbering giant. "Or perhaps such peace can never be. For on what manner of world could either Banner or the Hulk ever truly belong?"

The Hulk was on the move again, taking slow, ponderous steps along shimmering, intertwined pathways, the positions of which seemed to shift and slide in the corners of his vision. He gazed in mournful curiosity at each suspended portal, each doorway to a new life, unwilling to commit himself to any.

"He knows he must choose one," observed Guardian, "lest he be stranded here forever. And yet, the question is which? No choice has yet served him well."

"He should just pick one," asserted Goblin, "any one. If it leads him to a world that doesn't want him, then, well, he can smash it into submission! Nobody turns away the incredible Hulk. Nobody!" His belligerence had an apparent effect. The Hulk's top lip curled into a stubborn sneer, and he stopped. He stared into the nearest portal. And, immediately, his expression softened again.

As always, he could not see beyond its threshold. A material like gray water stretched across the aperture, but parted at his tentative touch and allowed his great green hand to pass through. Stars danced in its fabric; tiny points of light which, like Glow, touched something in his subconscious. He could not yet identify that part of him, nor put a name to the feeling. But he knew that it was good.

"Looks like he's made his decision," said Goblin proudly.

"Let us pray it is the correct one," said Guardian.

The Hulk withdrew his hand, stared at it blankly for a second, then flexed his leg muscles and leapt through the portal.

And into a vacuum.

He hadn't expected to wake up. Though he had not understood his peril at first, he had felt his throat burning, his chest aching, and he had pedalled in vain against the airless void and known on an instinctual level that something about it was taking his life. There had been no time for the failsafe spell to engage, no time for the Hulk to even entertain the necessary thoughts of dissatisfaction. No time for the Triad to do anything but shout pointless warnings that he could neither fully understand nor heed.

No time.

He hadn't expected to wake up, and yet here he was. Face-down in burning sands. Coughing up fine, hot particles that had already invaded his nose and mouth. Climbing slowly to his feet and shielding his eyes from the fierce yellow light of the sun. A smile, spreading across his face as taut muscles relaxed. At last. Here he was.

He had come home.

''His intellect continues to resurface,'' said Glow approvingly. ''He recognizes the New Mexican desert in which he was 'born' of atomic fire. And yet, how can such a thing be? By what quirk of fate could that portal have returned him to Earth?''

''What does it matter?'' asked Guardian. ''This is good. The Hulk has always thought of this place as his sanctuary, his succor.''

''For how long?'' asked Goblin. ''If he is on Earth, then soldiers and super heroes will soon come.''

''For now, at least,'' said Guardian, ''he is content.''

For the rest of that day, nobody did come. Nor for the next. A monster roamed the desert sands, basking in the peace and the solitude; the warmth and the security that the Crossroads could not provide. He wandered far and wide, but came across no signs of civilization. No humans. No soldiers. No conflict. No pain.

No food.

And yet, as hunger pangs began to pierce the behemoth's stomach,

an oasis loomed ahead. A pool of cold, clear, sparkling water. Trees, bearing luscious fruits. The Hulk feasted long and gratefully. But the Triad grew suspicious.

"Such plants could not have flourished in this climate," said Glow, "at least not on the Earth that we know. I would like the opportunity to examine them more closely, but the Hulk will hardly afford us that. I can, however, conclude one thing."

Guardian nodded in solemn agreement. "That this is not his world."

Their emerald charge sensed it too. On the fourth day, he became restless. He spent less time walking and more sitting disconsolately, knees drawn up to his chest. As alone as he had ever been. He returned to the oasis and stayed there. Lonely. Fatigued. Miserable. For a time, it seemed that the failsafe spell would be triggered.

Then, on the fifth day, six figures mounted the horizon.

The Hulk rose to greet them long before they reached him. He was outwardly perturbed by their approach, clenching and unclenching his fists and emitting a series of low rumbling growls from his chest. He seemed wary of these intruders, and ready to battle them. But Goblin opined that the Hulk was actually pleased; not only at the thought of company but more so at the prospect of a good fight. It saddened Guardian to think that her colleague was probably right.

But fighting seemed a remote possibility as the figures drew closer. They were slight of form, humanoid, and green in hue. Their eyes were wide and bright, betraying neither fear nor animosity toward the muscular brute who barred their path. They wore simple tunics of plain cloth and carried only food and water. The Hulk cocked his head to regard them, puzzled by the stirring of something deep within his bestial mind: the itching sensation of distant recognition. Glow knew that it was a faded memory of the woman called Jarella.

The figures stood before the Hulk now, expressions blank, tongues still. He tensed, recalling somehow that the most deadly of threats could come from such seemingly inoffensive sources.

Then, without a word, the new arrivals prostrated themselves before him, heads bowed as they knelt in the hot sand and prayed.

The Hulk was pleased.

* * *

Time passed. Blissful days, such as this tortured outcast had rarely known. The green-skinned beings worshipped the Hulk. They brought materials across the desert in handcarts and made for him a huge throne, cushioned with silk. Their numbers multiplied, and each newcomer brought offerings of meat and fruit. When the Hulk grew tired of his bleak surroundings, his willing servitors seeded the ground. With uncommon speed, the oasis expanded into a lush forest. He came to enjoy taking strolls here in the evening breeze, amongst the flora and the fauna—for wildlife abounded now: gentle deer, red squirrels, and beautiful bluebirds.

At first, Glow, Guardian, and Goblin were concerned. Too many things seemed to defy logic—and yet, on such an alien world, who could question the workings of nature? In time, their suspicions were eased and they too began to appreciate the tranquility. They slept for hours at a time, unseen as always although the Hulk was aware of their continuing presence. Glow's light began to dim and Goblin was uncharacteristically subdued. There was little need for the Triad now. There was no use even for language here: the inhabitants were mute. One of the Hulk's greatest pleasures was that they would pamper him without confusing his mind with endless chatter.

Guardian made her decision one balmy morning, as she woke on a soft bed of leaves. Her job was done. It was time to leave; to relax her grip on this life and to return to the darkness from whence she had come. There was no fear attached to the proposition. The Hulk was content at last, and Bruce Banner could rest in peace. And yet, as Guardian felt herself drifting away on a warm ethereal current, something held her fast to this plane. A golden towline to the Hulk's heart, anchored there by one new, burgeoning feeling.

Boredom.

An orange fist connected with the Hulk's head, catching him off-guard and driving him back into his throne, which collapsed beneath his considerable weight. He lay amid its splintered remains, not hurt but humiliated and confused. Why was he being attacked? Why had he not heard the approach of his assailant before the punch was

thrown? Who had dared to ruin his peaceful existence, to hunt and hound him once more? He let out a terrible, furious roar.

The Thing waved a rocky hand at the Hulk's erstwhile followers, as they scattered in fear. "Just thinkin' about what you've done to these poor jerks makes me mad, Green-Genes. So guess what time it is?" He charged his opponent, head down.

The Hulk was barely on his feet before his foe cannoned into his midriff. This time, though, he was prepared. He kept his balance and drove his fists down onto the back of the Thing's head. They grappled for a few brutal seconds, no quarter given by either party. The Hulk gained the upper hand. A solid punch to the jaw sent the Thing flying until a tree brought him up short and rained its leaves upon him.

Guardian flapped about helplessly. "What could have brought a member of the Fantastic Four here?"

"When last Banner saw Ben Grimm, the all-powerful Beyonder had drawn both into the incident that became known as the Secret Wars," Glow recalled. "At the end of that conflict, Grimm chose to remain upon the Beyonder's warworld. Could it be that the portal from the Crossroads has returned the Hulk to that same place?"

"Who cares where that big, orange punching bag came from?" Goblin positively danced with enthusiasm. "Our guy can take this loser any day of the week!"

"Puny rock man!" The Hulk had found his voice again. "Always spoiling things, always hounding Hulk."

"Where I come from, Hulkie," Grimm snarled, "we don't force innocent kids to act as our slaves." But he was circling now, unsteady on his feet, unwilling to press the attack. He was hurt.

"Typical human," hissed Goblin in the Hulk's ear. "He don't want to hear your side of it. He just wants to hit you."

"Typical human," the Hulk growled in agreement.

"He is simply mistaken, Hulk," Glow insisted. "You have a chance to show him that you mean no harm. He will leave you alone then."

"Take him, Hulk. Take him now, while he's weak!" Goblin cheered as the Hulk let out an incoherent war cry and closed with the

Thing for a second time. Anger stoked his strength and, for all his efforts, the smaller man could not hope to match him.

The Hulk landed blow after blow to his head and his solar plexus. Even when the Thing was punch-drunk and barely able to stand, the Hulk held him upright and continued the punishment. At last, his fury was sated enough for him to hear Guardian's urgent and impassioned pleas for leniency. Panting from his exertions, he stepped back and watched in satisfaction as his orange-skinned adversary crumpled to the hot sands.

Then he roared in pain as something hard and heavy smashed into him from behind.

The Hulk was on the ground again, a fire burning in his back. Spots danced before his eyes. He rolled over and stared up, to where the blazing sun silhouetted three more familiar intruders upon his perfect life. He struggled to his feet, legs feeling like jello. He emitted a threatening growl, but the Rhino only laughed as he backed up for a second charge, still basking in the success of his first. The Abomination moved to outflank his lifelong enemy, his craggy green features betraying an eagerness to finish what his ally had started. And the barely humanoid, muck-encrusted form of the Glob watched and waited for his own chance to add to the Hulk's misery.

"Go to it, Greenface!" goaded Goblin.

Guardian showed more concern. "Rarely have I seen the Hulk fight so savagely. He showed no mercy to the Thing, and he cares not what happens to these latest foes."

"Why should he? They attacked him first, remember?"

"He has not had to fight for so long," said Glow. "It is as if this threat has loosed something within him that hated to be submerged."

"I fear for him," said Guardian. "If he will not utilize what intellect he possesses, then how can he overcome such adversity?"

"He's the strongest one there is," Goblin countered. "He'll beat 'em, all right."

"We should rather be concerned," said Glow, "with finding an explanation for what is happening. It seems improbable that these creatures could have tracked the Hulk here."

"They hate him," snarled Goblin, "they always find him. They always try to make his life miserable. But he smashes them every time!"

"No, Glow is right," said Guardian. "There is something wrong here. There is more to this situation than meets the eye. Don't you feel it, Goblin?"

"Well, now you come to mention it. . . ."

The Hulk enjoyed a brief respite as his three attackers suddenly disengaged and took up holding positions around him. A ripple effect distorted the sky, and from it was formed a familiar image. A green-skinned man with a prodigious forehead stood upon a hovering golden platform. He held his hands behind his back, maintaining a deliberately casual air. The Hulk recognized the gamma-spawned, super-intelligent Leader.

"What better way to revenge myself upon you," the Leader crowed, "than to give you your longed-for peace only to snatch it from your grasp? Take one last look at what can never be yours, Hulk, at this, the hour of your demise."

The Hulk could understand only a fraction of the words, but it was enough. Drifting fragments of memory assured him that the Leader had taunted him thus many times before. Of all the persistent foes he had encountered today, the Leader was by far the deadliest. The Hulk had no doubt that he was the orchestrator of all that had befallen him. With a hateful snarl, he drove himself upward in an incredible leap . . . and sailed straight through both man and platform, dropping awkwardly back to the ground in bewilderment.

"Stupid beast," the Leader scoffed, rocking with forced laughter. "Why should I risk my own skin by appearing here in person? No, I am many miles away, you over-muscled simpleton. You have attacked merely a holographic projection. But I can still harm you: my pawns will provide enough strength to finish you once and for all."

The Rhino, the Abomination, and the Glob closed in once more. The Hulk met them head-on.

"No!" Glow's radiating light pulsed with the sheer force of his concentration. "This is too simple, and it still doesn't make sense.

How would the Leader have found the Hulk? Why would the Thing be prepared to do the Leader's bidding? How can the Glob exist so far from the swamp that spawned and nurtures him?''

But, logical or not, the situation endured.

The Hulk broke free of the Glob's suffocating grip, only to take the full force of the Abomination's fist in his gut. Knocked breathless, he hit back, but struck only a glancing blow. Muddy tendrils reached for his nostrils again. He lashed out blindly and succeeded in tearing the Glob's body apart—''too easily,'' Glow complained—and too late for the Hulk to dodge as the Rhino charged again and embedded his horn in his victim's back.

The Hulk cried out in animal pain and staggered into another onslaught from the Abomination. He was dizzy and sore, but angry too, and that gave him the strength to fight back. The two green-skinned monsters grappled and, in doing so, cut a swath of destruction about themselves. Squirrels darted for cover as trees crashed to the ground. The Abomination gained the upper hand. He snarled something, but the Hulk had completely lost his ability to understand speech. He fought with unbridled savagery, seeing nothing but the hate-twisted sneers of his mortal foes; hearing only the blood that pounded in his ears. A surge of triumph emboldened him as the Abomination fell at last beneath his powerful blows.

The Hulk turned his attention to the Rhino. Although protected by a tough, artificial gray hide, the villain actually looked afraid. He stood his ground anyway. Hulk and Rhino rushed headlong toward each other, and the ground shook with the impact of their monumental clash.

When the dust settled, only one combatant remained standing.

It seemed that the battle had lasted for an eternity. The Hulk could barely recall a time before it, though he knew he had been content in that long-distant past. Still, he had emerged victorious. Thing, Abomination, Glob, Rhino: all had paid for their relentless hounding of him. If the Hulk even noticed that their fallen bodies were nowhere to be seen, he gave no indication of it. Nor did he wonder why the Leader

had not shown himself again. Injured and drained, he felt his tremendous strength deserting him at last. His knees buckled and he fell upon them, sending up a cloud of yellow dust.

His forest no longer stood. Splinters of broken wood were strewn across the sand for as far as he could see: the only remnants of what his friends had made for him. Those same friends had deserted him too, fleeing at the first sign of peril. Or simply vanished, like his foes. The Hulk no longer cared. Let them go. Everybody left him in the end.

Remaining on his knees, the Hulk pined for a paradise lost.

"Nothing here is real," reasoned Glow. "All that we have seen, all that we have experienced, has come from the Hulk's own mind."

"How can that be true?" protested Guardian. "Why would he conjure up such things to torment himself?"

"And yet, what other explanation can there be? No, Guardian, this world was naught but cosmic dust until he arrived. Its form has been psychokinetically sculpted by his innermost thoughts; his desires."

"An infinitely malleable realm," Guardian breathed in awe, "where matter itself is molded to satisfy the Hulk's every whim. Then his own boredom with his idle life here . . ." She swallowed and did not complete the sentence.

"Only one question remains. So far as I can ascertain, the Hulk still has few memories, particularly of his bygone days on Earth. From which part of the brute's mind, then, did these images spring forth?"

"Hey," protested Goblin, "don't look at me!"

A new figure appeared in the desert, then: familiar, and yet the Triad could not place him immediately. He was shorter than the Hulk, and yet similar in form. His features were harder, thicker, rougher, and yet there was undeniably a resemblance there. Like the Hulk, he was clad only in a pair of stretchable purple trunks.

His skin was gray, and he wore a grin of pure malice.

"It is the Hulk in his original form," Glow realized. His tone suggested that he could scarcely believe what he was saying. "From what dark recess of the Hulk's consciousness could he have crawled?"

"More importantly," said Guardian, "what mischief does he in-

tend?'' The Triad closed in around the newcomer, curious and nervous.

The green Hulk was still on his knees, head bowed, paying no attention to events around him. The new, gray Hulk stood at his shoulder, ignored. For an awful second, Guardian thought he might attack.

Instead, the gray Hulk laughed. Or, at least, his throat emitted a series of choked, staccato barks.

''At last!'' he crowed, to the unheeding sky. ''At last, I'm free! Free of that stupid green monster. Free of that weakling, Banner. Do you hear me, both of you? I'm alive! I clawed my way out of that place and I ain't about to go back to it!''

Goblin alighted upon the gray Hulk's shoulder and inspected him with fascination. ''Another personality? How many does this guy have?''

''We had thought this one to have been destroyed,'' said Glow, ''and yet it is clear that he was only submerged, as is Banner.''

The gray Hulk leaned over his successor and growled in his ear: ''But this ain't enough. I want the real deal. I want the body—and, in case you haven't worked it out yet, I'm not planning to share!''

His words sent a thrill of panic through the Triad. This new Hulk awoke strong feelings of revulsion in them. He had not the green Hulk's savagery, true, but he possessed something worse. Was it . . . evil? If not that, then certainly a darker nature. Bitter. Uncaring. Even Goblin blanched at the thought of this persona running unchecked.

Guardian danced frantically before her green-skinned charge, but could awaken neither interest nor recognition in his dead eyes. ''He intends to kill you, Hulk. He will bury your mind in a dark and lonely place. You must wake and fight him. You must not let him win.''

She and Goblin turned and tried to beat down the usurper by force of will, but to no avail. The gray Hulk was unaffected by their attack.

''No!'' yelled Glow suddenly, his uncharacteristic panic rammed painfully into the minds of his colleagues. ''Guardian, Goblin, you must retreat from this vile creature!''

The warning came a half-second too late.

The gray Hulk pivoted, a muscular arm shooting out to pluck Goblin from the air. Thick fingers closed around his neck. The blue-

skinned demon let out a strangulated squawk. Guardian leapt back, startled.

"Thought I couldn't see you, didn't you?" the gray Hulk growled.

"Let me go, you big ox!" demanded Goblin in a hoarse voice.

"Thought I couldn't touch you!"

"You are being unreasonable," cried Glow.

"But I'm as much a part of you as we both are of Greenskin—only you three are the bigger threat to me, so you get to die first!" The monster tightened his grip.

"Banner," hissed Goblin, his eyelids fluttering as the breath was expelled from his body. "He wants to kill Banner."

"By destroying us, his avatars," cried Glow. "And, because the power of thought has furnished us with a physical presence in this realm—"

"Our lives are in danger!" finished Guardian. She had been frozen, unable to respond to this inconceivable new situation. Now, though, she had no choice but to act fast. She strung an arrow and let it fly toward the gray Hulk's head. It penetrated his thick skin without difficulty, passing through his brain and doing no physical damage, but leaving behind a fleeting, ethereal imprint of Bruce Banner's personality; a stark reminder of shared human origins.

The gray Hulk shuddered and Goblin flew gratefully out of his relaxed grip. But, if Guardian had hoped to create a new and lasting understanding in her enemy, she was to be disappointed. He reacted with anger to the images that flashed through his mind, screaming as his arms flailed in an attempt to punish the Triad for tormenting him so. Guardian felt a chill at the sight of the monster's rage unleashed. The gray Hulk's veneer of civilization had been peeled back and, for a moment, only his pigmentation differentiated him from his savage green counterpart.

Goblin was on his knees, coughing and spluttering. Guardian took him by the arm and dragged him clear as the gray Hulk rounded upon him again. They took flight, but Guardian did not dare to go far. What if the gray Hulk turned his attention to the helpless green Hulk, in the absence of the Triad? They had to keep him occupied. But how?

Glow's light intensified as he spoke reason and peace directly into

the mind of his adversary. It was a similar tactic to that which Guardian had tried, but the Triad had no better means of attack. This time, it seemed to be working. The gray Hulk's face softened, his muscles sagged, and his arms hung limply by his side.

"That is good," Glow encouraged him. "Embrace peace. Violence is not the solution. We are all but facets of one being: by squabbling, we can only hasten the destruction of all." Gray eyelids began to droop, and Glow dared to move closer. "Sleep now. Sleep, and accept your memories of Robert Bruce Banner. You are he. He is you."

"And you must think I'm stupid!"

Without warning, the gray Hulk snatched up a substantial piece of wood—the remains of a tree—and hurled it at Glow with all his might. As the makeshift missile collided with the hovering star, Guardian and Goblin clutched at their heads, which threatened to split apart with the resonance of an overwhelming telepathic screech of pain. Glow hit the the ground with a sickening thump, and his light was extinguished. A wisp of smoke curled up from where he lay.

Goblin swore, his face a mask of rage, and hurled himself at the gray Hulk.

"No, Goblin," Guardian trilled. "He is more cunning than we realized. You must not attack without a plan."

But Goblin had no plan, just blind fury: a fury that only increased as he laid into his target with all the strength in his sinews, to be greeted by raucous laughter. "Banner's anger," scoffed the Hulk, "as weak and repressed as it ever was."

"You won't ruin our lives again!" snarled Goblin.

"Ha! This time I'll just take 'em!" With an almost casual swipe of his hand, the gray Hulk knocked Goblin away from him. The blue-skinned demon travelled a good hundred yards, headlong, before landing with enough force to bury himself in the sand.

Now Guardian was alone. The manifestation of Bruce Banner's sense of self-preservation, she was the most cautious of the Triad. The helpless one, whose defeat would condemn the Hulk's human alter-ego to destruction. Her flimsy weapon would do nothing against this brute, but still she notched a second arrow as he thundered toward

her, his expression fairly gleeful at the prospect of the slaughter. It was all she could do. That, and attempt to dodge his powerful blows.

The first one made the ground shake, and threw up a flurry of sand. The second almost connected, and knocked the bow from Guardian's hands. Defenseless now, she took to the air. The gray Hulk swiped at her again, and she ducked beneath the great arc of his fist. She alighted on his shoulder, begging for mercy and weeping. He shrugged her off and tried to stomp on her as she fell to the ground, disorientated. She rolled out of the shadow of his enormous foot. She tried to run, but there was nowhere to run to.

At last, he had her. He wound steely fingers about her legs. She tried to prise them apart, but lacked even a fraction of the necessary strength. He sneered at her in triumph, and squeezed. And squeezed.

And squeezed.

And screamed in frustration, as something heavy crashed into him.

Guardian had almost blacked out. Purple spots crowded her field of vision. She struggled to blink them away. She felt light-headed. There was sand beneath her knees.

She was on the ground. Her captor had let her go. She was alive.

But the battle had not ended.

The two Hulks were fighting.

Guardian's initial reaction was one of disbelief, but this soon turned to joy. The green Hulk had come to the Triad's rescue, despite his own hatred of Banner. Somehow, he was restored to full health. The gray Hulk was buckling beneath his foe's superior strength, taken by surprise and unable to utilize his own cunning. Still, his hold upon this pseudo-life was strong, and the vicious fight was becoming protracted.

Guardian crawled across the sands and found Glow, no longer a shining beacon but merely a burnt-out plastic star, a child's discarded plaything. Goblin lay not too far from him, a rag doll with tears across his skin, from which stuffing leaked. She cradled them both in her lap and cried for them.

The green Hulk had his gray counterpart by the throat. They locked in close battle for interminable minutes, the gray Hulk stubbornly refusing to have the breath choked from him. He broke free, at last,

but was fighting a defensive battle. The green Hulk closed with him again, and the pair tumbled to the ground, rolling over and over in the sand. No words were spoken; perhaps neither participant was capable of speech any more. They lived only for this final, brutal, all-important fight, and it was soon clear that there could be only one outcome.

Guardian's tears cascaded onto her two colleagues. Tears for them. Tears for herself. Tears for the endless, mindless conflict that was the Hulk's life.

"Our guy is strong again," croaked Goblin, his left arm twitching.

Light flickered somewhere inside Glow. "Here, force of mind is equally as important as force of arms."

Guardian smiled with the pleasure of that realization. "Bruce Banner could have died today, but his instinct for self-preservation has become strong."

"He is healing," Glow pronounced sagely.

And, as the reinvigorated Triad watched, the green Hulk let out one final roar of defiance and literally crushed his foe to gray powder. It mingled with the sand and the splintered wood and was dispersed on a soft, cool breeze that rolled in from the east, along with the interloper's final words.

"I will be back!"

There was no one left to fight now. Nothing left of the world that the Hulk's mind had created. The green-skinned natives had gone, and all of what they had planted and built for him was destroyed. Somehow, the brute was aware of what he had lost, and he was miserable. He surveyed his decimated surroundings with sad eyes, and seemed to know as did the Triad that his paradise could never be rebuilt.

This was not the land he had thought it to be—just another realm of false promises. One more world on which the Hulk could not live.

Another place with which he had become dissatisfied.

The Crossroads. Again.

This time, he greeted his prison with a head-dropped expression of

acceptance. Resigned to his fate. As always, the Triad were beside him. They watched on in concern.

"It is to cry for," said Guardian softly, her heart breaking. "This latest world should have provided an ideal home for him. It could have been whatever he wished it to be."

"And yet," said Goblin, "the big lummox ruined it for himself."

"His expectations of conflict brought conflict to him," said Glow. "Perhaps, on an instinctual level, he even felt a need for it. Perhaps he is incapable of being happy when he is at peace."

"How could he be," asked Guardian, "when the very aspects of his own persona are at war with each other?"

"The Hulk can never know contentment," said Glow, "because he cannot be content with himself. True, he may soon forget this disappointment. His displeasure with the Crossroads will propel him to search ever onward. It will force him to pass through more portals, explore more worlds, search for happiness wherever he can find it. But, each time, he will unwittingly prevent himself from attaining what he seeks."

"And each inevitable setback," said Guardian, "will see him returned here, to the Crossroads. To this gloomy prison. Perhaps for the rest of his poor, tortured life."

THE BEAST WITH NINE BANDS

James A. Wolf

Illustration by Al Milgrom

The road stretched through a vast expanse of dull, flat Texas scrub. The silver truck—bearing the logo of Texican Beverages, the proud makers of Saguaro Iced Tea, Commanche Cola, and Peccary Fruit Punch—sped down the highway. Its driver, a heavyset man with a crewcut left over from his army days, listened to George Strait. The occasional chatter strip drowned out the tape, but the driver knew the songs so well that George sang right over the buzzing meant to keep truckers awake. It was part of the music of the road.

Normally, Billy Joe McCay would not drive so fast. He had a perfect safety record and never received a single ticket in his fifteen years of driving tractor-trailer trucks. Tonight, however, he had a good reason for speeding back to Amarillo from Fort Worth. He was heading home to watch his son, Bubba, play his first high-school football game as a starter. Bubba was not in a position that received much glory, but even offensive guards need love, especially when facing a school with the best inside linebacking tandem in the state. Billy Joe had the road to himself, and visibility was excellent, with a full moon bathing the land in her borrowed sunlight.

The accident was not his fault.

He was thinking about the upcoming game when, suddenly, a mound-shaped form shambled onto the interstate, directly in the truck's path. It was as big as a Volkswagen minibus, the kind the hippies from Austin drove and lived in. The instant he saw the object illuminated by the semi's highbeams, Billy Joe instinctively swerved left and stomped on the brakes, slamming the heel of his palm on the horn.

No truck can stop easily, even without the full load of sixteen-ounce bottles Billy Joe ferried. As he bore down on the mysterious object in front of him, he noticed the nine vertical stripes on its dust-colored flanks.

Then the thing leapt so swiftly that by the time Billy Joe's mind registered its movement, the thing was already on the way down. It

landed on the trailer, far behind the cab, pushing the vehicle further into the turn, causing the van to tip over dangerously.

Billy Joe thought of his wife and God before his truck flew off the road and the impact drove him into darkness.

The other participant landed on a Joshua tree abutting the road. The gnarled conifer shattered under the beast's bulk. The creature righted itself, shook its head as if to clear it, and trudged into the prairie night.

Earlier that evening, a cobalt-blue van was driving the opposite direction on the same highway. Rick Jones was driving the van he referred to as "the Winnebago from Hell." It did look like a small recreational vehicle on the outside.

Naturally, appearances were deceiving; the van, with its high-tech arsenal, could meet an M1 tank on fairly equal terms. Inside the van was an astonishing assortment of personal weapons, some of which could place their wielder on an almost even footing with many of the super heroes roaming the world.

The van had been stolen by a renegade secret agent named Clay Quartermain. A handsome, blond-haired man with chiseled features and intense blue eyes, Quartermain had until recently been a member of a law enforcement agency called S.H.I.E.L.D.; its name was an acronym for Strategic Hazard Intelligence, Espionage, and Logistics Directorate. At the moment, he was glaring at the man hunched in the rear of the van.

The target of Quartermain's anger was an ordinary man with dull brown hair and thick glasses, which gave him a true impression of studiousness. Nobody glancing at the Casper Milquetoast-like figure would guess that the world trembled at the mere mention of his name: Dr. Bruce Banner.

Alter ego of the incredible Hulk.

"You stupid, pigheaded, *mo*-ron," Quartermain snarled. "You *had* to brawl with that blasted mutant and screw up our schedule."

Quartermain was talking about the previous night, when the Hulk battled the X-Man called Wolverine outside of Dallas. A few nights before that, Quartermain and the Hulk had destroyed Gamma Base, and now they and Rick Jones were fugitives, searching for the gov-

ernment's collection of gamma bombs—devices like the one that had created the Hulk.

Banner said mildly, "It was the Hulk, not me."

Quartermain opened his mouth, but closed it hastily. The border where Banner ended and the Hulk began had become nebulous, especially now that the Hulk was less powerful, but more intelligent. The Hulk's skin was now gray in tone, and he emerged from Banner with the setting of the sun.

"Look, Quartermain, I said I'm sorry," Banner snapped. "If that isn't enough, then take it up with the Hulk." He pointed to the blood-red sun, low on the horizon before them. "He'll be out in a little while."

Quartermain scowled.

"Do you think time is of the essence?" asked Banner.

"Maybe," replied the ex-agent. "I have this feeling we aren't the only players in this gamma bomb drama. Call it paranoia, or even woman's intuition." He flashed a brief, ironic smile. "Besides, the longer we're on the road, the more exposed we are."

Jones groaned as the radio dissolved into static in the middle of "Paradise by the Dashboard Light." At least music was a distraction from the tedium of driving through the unchanging flatland. The moment was coming for the change, as it did every night, and Jones dreaded it. He wondered how far down on the horizon the sun would get before—

"Ahh!" Banner clutched his stomach and crumpled.

Right on schedule, Jones thought as he glanced in the rearview mirror.

Banner was in a fetal position, screaming in agony from the transformation that occurred with the setting of the sun. Jones determinedly switched his eyes back to the road. He had seen the transformation before; it still sickened him.

"*Aaaaaarrrrrgggggghhhhh!*" The scientist's voice fell two octaves in that one scream. Banner's body stretched as if every fiber of his being was on a rack. His features contorted as his face became wider and a snarl set on his lips. The skin turned slate gray and his jumpsuit shredded as Banner's body grew.

Being the Hulk was hell on the clothing budget.

"Okay, Binky," the Hulk said to Quartermain with his usual growl, "now where are we?"

"We're in the county of Arcadia Plains, Texas," Quartermain said. "We'll take Route 27 North to 287 all the way to Kansas. Is that okay?"

"Nothing's okay, especially not you, Quartermain," the Hulk replied. "You got a beef, don't take it up with Banner—say it to my face. If you've got the guts, that is."

The van sped on. It was already turning out to be a long night.

"What kind of girl do you think I *am*?" Suzy McAllen demanded of her boyfriend, Brent Brewer.

Brent, not wishing to get slapped again, censored his first thought. Instead, he said, "Aw come on, Suzy Q."

Suzy casually rearranged her hair and said, "I don't know *why* I came here. We shouldn't have left the party."

Brent, who knew why *he* came here, realized his objectives were unattainable for tonight. A strategic withdrawal in good order would permit him to regroup and ensure that he would be well positioned for future attempts. He turned the ignition and let the motor run for a few moments.

Suzy sighed. "Brent, I'm sorry. It was—"

"Hey, I understand. It's okay. You just didn't feel like it."

As Brent turned on the headlights, Suzy said, "I'm so glad that you—Brent!" She pointed to a form illuminated by the headlights, and shrieked.

Brent's jaw fell at the sight of the monster's head. It was narrow, with a long snout, framed by a pair of donkey ears as long as his arm. But it was the eyes—the black, soulless, beady eyes—that threw him into raw panic. He yanked the gearshift into reverse and stepped on the gas, hurling the car blindly backward into the darkness.

After the Hulk's emergence, the van was silent for almost two hours. Then Rick Jones shouted, "Whoa!" and pointed to the impressive sight of the wreckage ahead of them.

A tractor-trailer lay on its left side, three-quarters off the highway. Jones pulled over to the shoulder of the road.

The Hulk remained in the van, not to hide, but to sulk and grumble about his two human companions.

Jones tended to Billy Joe, who had miraculously escaped with only cuts and scrapes. Quartermain walked the length of the truck, scanning the highway with a flashlight.

"Should I call the cops, Clay?" Jones asked.

"Yeah. We'll keep the Hulk hidden back there." The renegade was unusually pensive. "Rick, did you see anything . . . suspicious up there?"

Jones tapped the medical kit against his thigh. "What do you mean, 'suspicious'?"

"This situation is weird. A one-vehicle accident on a clear road, and no sign of another vehicle at all? There's no sign of a collision, either. I saw skidmarks from the truck, but nothing else."

"Mechanical failure?" That was what reporters always mentioned on the news when aeronautics officials could not figure out why a plane had crashed.

"I doubt it. We have one set of skidmarks here," Quartermain pointed his light down the road, "and they clearly indicate the driver swerved to avoid an object. Driver in the right lane of a westbound highway, swerves violently into the median strip and. . . ." His voice trailed off as he walked along the dark trail created by the truck's tires.

The Hulk emerged from the van and, looking at the rear doors of the overturned trailer, said, "Texican Beverages. Good. I'll have something to wash my chow down after I find something to eat. I'm gone." He crouched in preparation for a tremendous leap.

"Wait!" yelled Quartermain. "We're calling an ambulance and—"

"I can't be seen," finished the Hulk. "I know. That's why I'm going out there." He indicated the arid landscape. "I'll hide out until dawn. Just before dawn, have Jones look for me with some clean clothes and some breakfast." The Hulk grabbed the flashlight from Quartermain. "That'll get the cops off your back."

"Now, hold on!" the ex-agent protested. But it was too late. The

Hulk leapt away, briefly silhouetted by the moon before vanishing from the night sky.

"God," muttered Quartermain, "I wish he'd listen."

"Yeah," said Jones, wistfully. "You know, back in the old days, he *used* to listen to me. Sometimes. But at least now he's smart enough—"

"He's only smart enough to know he doesn't have to listen to us, Rick," Quartermain interjected. "He's not smart enough to take care of himself." He headed for the van. "I'll call the cops."

Jones went back to the cab to make sure the trucker was comfortable. As Jones wiped the blood from his face, the trucker muttered, "Big . . . big . . . couldn't stop. It jumped. . . . What in hell was it? Big thing . . . big critter. It's gone now, ain't it . . . *ain't it*?"

Jones shuddered, wondering what horrific sight could be responsible for the trucker's wild-eyed stare.

The Hulk landed two kilometers away, his impact making a satisfying *thooom!* He looked around, but saw nothing. No signs of food or civilization, and here he had to stay.

He sat in the dirt and thought back to the end of his latest brawl with Wolverine. That mutant runt had pushed a button in the Hulk's psyche that literally brought out the beast in him. The fight had ended only because Quartermain had fired on the combatants and chastised them for brawling. What especially rankled the Hulk was when Quartermain told him, *"If you're not the 'mindless Hulk' anymore, start acting that way. Get some priorities, for pity's sake!"*

The Hulk thought about his priorities. He wanted to stop the government from stockpiling gamma bombs, which could make more monsters like him. Right now, though, his more immediate priority was to keep himself from being discovered while sitting out here in the desert.

The Hulk snorted with derision. That compulsiveness was pure Banner. On second thought, his attention to detail was useful, sometimes. Categorize everything. What were his priorities? Not just tonight. Not just when he found the gamma bomb stockpile, but afterward.

If Banner thought he was cursed by the Hulk, that was nothing compared to the animosity the Hulk felt toward his bloodless alter ego. Banner was a lead weight around his neck, pulling him below the water's surface. There were places he wanted to go, things he wanted to do, but with Banner in charge, he would never get near somewhere like Las Vegas. No. That prissy jerk would make sure the Hulk would have no opportunity to step out and live his own life for once.

That was when he heard the grunting and snuffling behind him, sounding vaguely like it came from some sort of enormous pig. He turned around in time to see a gargantuan, shadowy hump bearing down on him. The Hulk was so startled that, as the leathery form brushed against him, he fell on his rump.

The . . . whatever it was . . . disappeared into the night so quickly that the Hulk could not catch more than a glimpse. The gray-skinned behemoth sat on the ground, wondering what had shoved him.

Jones came by about an hour after dawn with clean clothes and Banner's glasses.

"Bruce?" he called out.

Banner cautiously stepped out from behind a boulder. His tattered pants hung in streamers from his lean frame, and his bare chest and arms bore the scratches of a cactus or two that he had brushed against in his travels. Bleary, bloodshot eyes swept the area to make certain no one was watching the meeting.

"Don't worry, Doc," said Jones. "The coast is clear. The sheriff is too busy overseeing the semi's removal before it causes any big traffic problems."

"What did he think about you wandering off into the desert with a change of clothes?" Banner asked as he shrugged out of his torn outfit.

"I told him my wacky best friend went running off after whatever had flipped the truck and just forgot to take his pants with him."

Banner's eyebrows rose in a quizzical fashion. "And he accepted that?"

Jones shrugged. "Well, he didn't believe my first story." He grinned broadly. "I told him you were a werewolf."

"Wonderful," Banner muttered. He zipped up the new jumpsuit. "Let's go back."

They walked briskly to the road. Banner told Jones of the strange encounter the Hulk had during the night.

"I don't like this, Bruce," Jones commented. "The driver talked a little before the ambulance arrived—"

"How is he?" asked Banner. "I should have been with him but the Hulk—"

"—was right," Jones interjected. "The trucker will be fine—only a moderate concussion. Anyway, he said something big knocked his truck over. Something about the size and shape of a VW bug."

"That about fits what I . . . the Hulk saw."

The ambulance was long gone, but two police cruisers still bracketed the trucks, their lights flashing in warning. Remaining behind with the cars were the sheriff and his chief deputy. Sheriff Sowell, a black man with a linebacker's build, slightly graying hair, and a piercing stare, was engaged in an intense conference with Quartermain. He appeared to be listening patiently to Quartermain as the ex-agent pointed to gouges on the roof of the truck's cab, which matched the claw marks by the shattered Joshua tree.

Dale, the deputy, wandered the length of the toppled vehicle, morosely inspecting the shards of headlight glass scattered along the truck's path. He was a wiry, angular man, with a pinched face dominated by a ten-gallon hat and sunglasses.

Dale looked up and glared at Jones as he and Banner approached. " 'Bout time you got back here!" he yelled. "The sheriff wants to talk to y'all." He gestured toward Sowell, who glared intimidatingly at the two men. Dale, muttering all the while, continued his migration alongside the truck.

"Well," Sowell said mildly to Banner, "I'm so glad to see that you didn't have any . . . misadventures last night. Especially considering that something capable of doing that—" he pointed to the pile

of kindling that used to be a Joshua tree "—is still running around out there."

"I can take care of myself," Banner replied.

"One might ask why you had to run around in the dark last night," Sowell continued. "One might ask why you are hanging around with this young punk and blondie here—" he gestured toward Quartermain "—who seems to know more about mechanical forensics than I was taught at the State Police Academy. But, since you are being so helpful, I'll just ask you about what you saw last night, Mr. . . . 'Bixby.' That *is* your name, correct?"

Banner glanced quickly at Jones, then nodded. "Yes, it is."

"What did you see last night, pray tell?"

"Not a great deal. It was dark."

"Well, it *was* night," Dale interjected. A glare from Sowell quieted him.

"Whatever I saw out there was large, about five, six feet high," Banner said. "It was about the size of a small car."

"What make and model?" Dale asked.

Sowell cut him another look. Dale went back to examining the crash site.

"Whatever it was," Bruce continued, "it knocked me down and kept going. I only got a vague glimpse of it. Big as a small car and the shape of a half a wheel of cheese: mound-shaped front to back, but narrow."

"Hey, speaking of cheese," Jones said, "is there someplace where we can get breakfast? I'm starvin'."

Sowell nodded. "Noreen's place. Few miles down the road, in Depinthehata. We can talk more there."

The county seat of Arcadia Plains is the town of Depinthehata, derived from an Indian word of obscure origin. It is a typical, dusty and often tired small town, with garages, convenience stores, auto body shops, and other utilitarian structures.

One of its few distinctive landmarks is Noreen's Cafe, by the railroad tracks. It is frequented by truckers and stockyard employees who

come despite the grubbiness, the ingrained dirt on the linoleum, the waitresses with stained aprons and the fly strips black with insects.

Banner plowed through two breakfast specials. Jones nibbled on a hamburger, while Quartermain gnawed on eggs and homefries. Sowell and Dale sat on the opposite side of the booth.

"How's the truck driver?" asked Banner.

"He's fine, Mr. Bixby," Sowell said. "The hospital will release him tomorrow. He still can't remember anything about the accident."

Dale smiled. "Now I know you've been real helpful and all, but anything else you can do to help . . . well, we'd appreciate it. Something you remembered, or that makes sense only now, or even any wild ideas about the accident, would be helpful."

"In my expert opinion . . ." Banner began, then hastily clamped his jaw shut.

"And how did you and Mr. Quartermain obtain your expertise?" Sowell asked smoothly.

"I was being sarcastic," Bruce said quickly.

"I couldn't tell, Mr. Bixby. But in your *expert* opinion . . ."

"My best guess is some sort of animal."

"Biggest thing around these parts are buffalo," said Dale.

"Bison," Banner corrected primly.

"Whatever. But there's no bison within one hundred miles of here," replied Dale.

"Maybe," Jones said with a wry smile, "it was something *unnatural.* Got any mad scientists around these parts?"

"No *mad* scientists nearby," Dale replied, matter-of-factly, "but we've got a *ticked-off* one by the name of Pearl Sin. Couple of the Brewer boys went joyriding in her jeep few weeks back—she was *real* angry about that. Now that you mention it, I haven't seen her around for a week."

"What does she work on?" Banner asked. "Anything to do with—"

"Sheriff! Sheriff! Oh, God, you've got to help us!" cried a shrill male voice. "We nearly got eaten alive!"

A wild-eyed teenager, whose disheveled hair was plastered with dirt and twigs, ran into the cafe.

"Dang," said Dale. "It's Brent Brewer. We'll talk to him. You three stay here."

"This is getting weird, even by our standards," Quartermain muttered. He watched as Sowell and Dale spoke with the youth, attempting to calm him down. The teenager gesticulated wildly, explaining how a monster had wrecked his father's car.

"I know," Banner said to Quartermain. "This situation makes me nervous."

Jones rolled his eyes and pointed to Banner's plate. "If you're so nervous, how can you eat like that?"

"I'm hungry, Rick. *He* takes a lot out of me."

Sheriff Sowell returned to the booth. "Finish up guys. This is going on my tab." He gestured toward Quartermain. "Blondie and me are looking at this latest wreck. You two and Dale are paying Dr. Sin a housecall."

On the way to, in Dale's words, "the House of Sin," Banner asked, "Are you sure you don't know anything about her research?"

"Nope, Mr. Bixby," Dale replied. "Don't see how that'd have anything to do with this case, anyway."

The small ranch house, no more than five rooms, seemed lonely in the desolate prairie. According to Dale, that was exactly the way Dr. Sin wanted things.

As they neared the house, Dale said, "Uh-oh."

Banner stared at the front of the dilapidated ranch house. The screen door was torn off its hinges. How often had he seen the results of violence, presented in similar ominous fashion? Destruction was becoming a cliché in his life.

Dale entered the house first, gun drawn, muzzle sweeping across the main room. "Doc Sin?" he called out. "Pearl? Anyone home?" He moved on to an adjoining room.

Banner examined the contents of the cages by the opposite wall. Fourteen cages held two armadillos each. To his right, a table was covered with all sorts of scientific equipment: beakers, Bunsen burners, test tubes, petri dishes, extremely powerful microscopes, and a

sophisticated centrifuge. Next to the table was a large, dilapidated refrigerator.

"Is that a brain?" Jones asked. He pointed to a small, grayish lump in a pan that sat in the center of the equipment.

"An armadillo's, I'd imagine," Banner said. "Not much in size, is it?" He looked up as Dale returned. "She's not here, I trust."

The deputy nodded and reholstered his pistol. "Why does she have a fridge here, when there's one in the kitchen?"

"Obviously, it's for perishable samples." Banner opened the refrigerator. "Interesting," he said, looking at a sealed plastic box.

Dale picked it up and read the label on the side of the box. "Hansen's Bacillus?"

"Leprosy," Banner explained.

Dale replaced the box with exaggerated care.

"Leprosy won't kill you," Banner said.

"Naw, it just makes your nose fall off."

Banner smiled. "Actually, leprosy attacks the skin and deadens your peripheral nerves. You can't feel, and you can cut yourself without knowing. The cuts get infected without care. You know the rest. In fact, to be vulnerable, you have to have a low resistance to begin with. Besides," he said, holding up a stoppered glass bottle of an antibiotic, "she has the cure."

"I read somewhere that armadillos get leprosy," said Dale. "But eating them is fine, so long as the meat is cooked well."

Jones poked his head into the main room. "Guys, I think I found something out back." He led them through the hall to the back door.

"Here it is," said Jones. He pointed to a ruined cage, twice as large as the ones in the laboratory.

Dale looked grim. "I think the sheriff'll want to know about this. Let's go."

They retraced their steps to the main room. Suddenly, Dale stopped short. As Banner peered around the deputy, he heard the ominous *schuck-chack* of a pump action shotgun.

Pearl Sin was an attractive Asian woman, with a cascade of shiny, jet-black hair falling almost to her waist. She wore no makeup, not that her resolute face really needed it. At the moment, however, her

beauty was marred by a large bandage covering the right side of her face from scalp to chin. The red T-shirt she wore—emblazoned with the logo of Clark University—so dwarfed her petite frame that her beige shorts were almost totally hidden from view. A pair of worn sandals completed her outfit.

Banner's attention, however, was riveted on the double-barreled shotgun she pointed in his direction.

"Gentlemen," Dr. Sin said, "I hope you have a good explanation for trespassing."

Quartermain and Sowell squatted by the side of the creek, looking at the footprint in the mud.

The print was four feet long and two feet wide. It had four long toes, with the middle two of equal length, and the outer ones slightly splayed. It disquietingly reminded Quartermain of a dinosaur's footprint.

"Look familiar, Sheriff?" he asked.

"Vaguely. Maybe something I've seen on a smaller scale." Sowell looked at a willow tree gouged by the car. "Looks like Joe Brewer was telling the truth." Even the untrained eye could see the route the car followed into the grove, and the results of the violent reverse into the unfortunate tree trunk.

Sowell looked thoughtful. "I think I know what that footprint is. It's crazy, but. . . ." He rose to his feet. "We have to see Dr. Sin."

Quartermain stood up. "We sent Bruce, Rick, and your deputy—"

"They might need help." Sowell jumped in the patrol car. Quartermain grumbled under his breath as he joined the sheriff. Kicking up a cloud of dust, the patrol car tore out of the lovers' lane.

"What did that footprint look like?" Quartermain demanded. "And what does that have to do with this Dr. Sin?"

"I see footprints like that all the time in my back yard," Sowell replied. "Not so big, of course. Doc Sin conducts experiments on—"

"Armadillo!" Quartermain yelled, pointing ahead.

Indeed, shambling across the road with an elephantine gait was an armadillo as large as a delivery truck. It turned its shell-covered head

toward the approaching car. Sowell swerved to avoid the creature . . . too late.

The patrol car flew off the dirt road and into a ditch.

"Deputy Dale, is that you?" asked Dr. Sin, completely aghast. "I'm so embarrassed. I thought. . . ." She placed her weapon against the wall.

"Where did you get that gun?" asked Dale.

"I just came back from buying it. I do have a permit, you know." Sin nodded her head toward Banner and Jones. "Who are your friends?"

Banner stepped up to offer his hand. "I'm—"

"You're Bruce Banner," said Sin, with astonishment.

With the speed of a striking diamondback, Dale drew his pistol and pointed it at Banner. "I thought you looked familiar!" he said. "You're that Hulk guy. Don't you make any sudden moves! I'm placing you under arrest."

"Dale," said Sin in a mild, yet firm, tone. "We have a larger problem than the Hulk. I think you know what it is."

"How did you recognize me?" Banner asked Sin.

"You spoke at my high school during my senior year. I never forgot the speech—it was an important influence on my life. But now we have more important things to do."

Banner nodded. "I see you've been attempting to reverse neurological damage induced by Hansen's Bacillus through the application of fetal tissue."

"Not quite," Sin replied. "I used a localized hormonal treatment to induce regression of the neurons to an embryonic, and therefore regenerable, state."

Banner was genuinely impressed. "Now, that's clever."

"In English, *por favor*," said Dale.

"Fully grown nerve cells can't regrow, which is why spinal injuries can result in permanent paralysis," Sin explained. "But when we are embryos, our nerve cells grow like mad. What I do is fool the nerve cells into thinking they're young again."

"How? With a toupee and sports car?" Jones asked.

Banner glared at his friend. Jones smiled and shrugged.

"Who supports your work?" Banner asked.

"The Department of Defense, Dr. Banner," Sin said. "I worked at the Army Medical Labs in San Antonio, before I was forced out here."

"And they tried to make your work into a weapon."

Sin shook her head. "No, I almost wish they had—it would have meant more funding. Everyone wanted to associate themselves with my project without doing any work. Then came those . . . *jerks* from the Veterans Administration. I had to escape out here to get any work done."

"Why armadillos?" Jones asked.

"They are susceptible to leprosy, breed faster than primates, and have litters consisting of genetically identical specimens."

"Now for the fifty-thousand dollar question," said Dale. "What happened?"

"Number Forty-two, a male, received standard treatment, and regained at least seventy-seven percent sensation. Sometimes the treatment results in an increase in size, usually of fifty to one hundred grams. However, Forty-two kept growing and growing. He was . . . very large when I decided to sacrifice him."

"Sacrifice?" Jones asked.

Sin drew a well-manicured finger across her throat. "I have to do that to half of my subjects. Anyhow, three days ago I decided I had to see what went wrong with Forty-two. Unfortunately, when I opened the cage to inject him with . . . a solution, he knocked me aside and fled out the door. When I started the treatments, he was about two-and-a-half feet long. When he escaped, he was about the size of a German Shepherd."

Clay Quartermain burst through the door and staggered into the main room. "What I saw was bigger than any shepherd recognized by the American Kennel Club!" His face looked like an alley cat had vented its frustrations on him.

Sowell entered close behind, also staggering and bloodied. Dale stood up and opened his mouth, but Sowell said, "I know about the

armadillo. We ran into it . . . so to speak. Our car went into the ditch and the radio got smashed. We walked all the way.''

Flopping into a chair, Sowell groaned softly. ''I've got just one question for you, Pearl: How do we stop this thing?''

The group slowly turned their heads to a suddenly uncomfortable Banner.

Between Willot Creek and the scene of the truck accident was undistinguished flatland, but the ground where the van was parked looked as if it had been excavated by a madman with a backhoe.

Jones looked at the gouges etched in the soil. The fresher ones were wider than their predecessors. ''What happened?''

''There was a huge prairie dog town here,'' Dale answered. The deputy looked at Dr. Sin, who had changed into jeans and sneakers.

''Armadillos are omnivores, but they prefer insects.'' She shrugged. ''Obviously, Forty-two was foraging for food.''

''Not just here,'' said Sheriff Sowell. ''I talked to Ned Harris over the radio. Says something went through his chicken coop like a tornado.'' He sighed, then turned to glare at Banner. ''I don't like you, Banner, or that thing you turn into. If it was up to me, I'd have you locked away someplace where you'd never be able to harm another living soul.

''Fortunately for you, I've got a mutated armadillo running loose in my town, and right now, that takes precedence over you and your green-skinned alter ego.''

''He's, uh, actually *gray* these days, Sheriff,'' Banner said softly.

Sowell stared at him for a moment, then frowned. He dramatically waved a hand at the land around them. ''This place might not be a paradise in the middle of the desert, but there are a lot of good people living here who've worked hard to carve out a little place of their own to call home. I'd hate to see some oversized roadkill destroy what little they have.''

''I understand, Sheriff,'' Banner said. He paused. ''Look, I have to warn you. The Hulk may not want to help you—he tends to have his own agenda. I don't like relying on him, and I wouldn't be doing this

if it wasn't absolutely necessary. But I *do* want to do whatever I can to help.''

Sowell nodded. ''I appreciate that. As for the Hulk's cooperation, I'll cross that bridge after he shows up.''

''Okay, people,'' said Quartermain, jumping from the van. ''Just to be on the safe side, I brought some toys.'' He donned something that looked like a knapsack attached to a gigantic telescope. ''This is a SLIME, or Shoulder Launching Integral Missile Engine. It launches standard issue Smart Linked Anti-Monster Missiles, or SLAMM. These wire-guided missiles—'' he displayed what looked like a rocket propelled grenade topped with a drill head ''—are tipped with Single Composite Rotating Entry Warhead, or SCREW. Should go through an armadillo like a knife through butter.''

''So, Clay,'' Jones said, ''do they actually *pay* somebody to come up with those dopey names for military weapons, or do you stay up nights with a Scrabble set making 'em up yourself?''

Quartermain growled menacingly at the young man.

Dale turned to Banner. ''Now, how do we get the Hulk out? Call you names?''

''We wait for the sun to set.'' Banner pointed to the blood red orb sinking below the horizon. ''I suggest you leave me alone. The Hulk will know what we want him to do, and he'll tell you if he agrees.''

The others returned to the van and waited for the transformation to begin.

Banner sat on the furrowed ground and watched the sun sink lower on the horizon. Already, he could feel the Hulk fighting for release, demanding to be set free from the thin, puny body that entrapped him, impatient to begin his nocturnal prowling.

The sun disappeared below the horizon. Bruce Banner's day of freedom was over.

The night belonged to the Hulk.

An inhuman bellow of pain roared from the lanky scientist's throat as the transformation began. But it was more than a cry of pain.

It was the birthing howl of a monster.

* * *

Moments later, the Hulk rose to his feet and stomped over to the van.

"Dr. Banner?" Sin gasped as he strode into view.

"No," said the Hulk with a sly grin. "Better." He climbed inside, stopping to stare at the elaborate weaponry that Quartermain wore. "What're *you* supposed to be—a Transformer?"

Quartermain sneered at him in silence.

Sheriff Sowell stepped up and cleared his throat. "Do you remember anything about what Banner and I discussed?"

The Hulk glared at him for a moment. "I'm not an idiot, Quickdraw McGraw—not anymore, at least. Talkin' to that four-eyed pantywaist Banner is as good as talkin' to me." He pointed a thick finger at Sowell. "Far as I'm concerned, you and your little slice o' heaven can go twist in the wind for all I care." His lips curled back in a snarl. "But I want a piece of Mr. Nine-bands—he made me look stupid last night. *Nobody* makes me look stupid." He glanced at Sin. "You want it dead or alive, little lady?"

"Alive, preferably," she said.

The Hulk grinned. "No promises." He turned to Jones. "Move it out, Jones—I got some payback to dole out."

Jones threw the van into gear.

Two miles from Willot Creek, and five from the Harris ranch, they found the monster's burrow. The van's headlights illuminated the gargantuan mound of earth the armadillo had excavated.

"He won't be there," said Sin. "He's foraging now."

"Still, I want to take a look," said Quartermain.

The Sheriff, with a grim expression on his face, joined him. They pointed their flashlights into the maw of the cave.

"A lot of this is freshly dug," said the Sheriff.

"Activating targeting system," Quartermain muttered. He looked to Sowell. "Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Do you have to tote that SLIME thing around?"

"I don't think your hunting rifle will stop it."

"You're probably—what the heck . . . ?"

Sowell stared at the van, which had sprouted a mechanical arm

bearing a spotlight. The universal joint swiveled, pointing behind the van. The Hulk opened the door, and stepped out, followed by Jones and Dale. The young man carried a weapon that looked like the king of the bazookas, while the deputy carried an M-16.

Pointing an oversized thumb at Sin, the Hulk said, "Sweetcakes says our buddy's heading here, and he's grew some . . . so to speak. We're talking school bus size, now."

Sowell said, "How big will this thing get?"

The beam picked out the beige monster, off in the distance.

The Hulk turned to Rick. "Jones, put that thing away before you hurt yourself. Go and run things from the van. The rest of you," he said, pointing to Quartermain and Sowell, "stay put and outta my way." Then, with a tremendous leap, he flew toward the monster.

The Hulk landed in front of the startled creature and said, "Okay, roadkill, your shell is mine!"

The creature stared stupidly at the Hulk, its beady eyes blank with incomprehension.

The Hulk stared into the armadillo's vacuous eyes, and realized that he was facing off against one of the stupidest creatures on earth.

Just like that butt-ugly, green-skinned baboon I used to be, he thought. *Stupid and docile. Not a clue in his head. Well, those days are long gone.*

The Hulk cocked his fist back.

"Target in range," Quartermain whispered. The armadillo—sent flying by the force of the Hulk's punch—was projected in the crosshairs on the helmet display. The SLIME beeped with the acquisition of its target.

Quartermain was so engrossed with the weapon system that he failed to notice the sheriff and deputy aiming their own weapons.

"*Fire!*" yelled Quartermain as he launched a wire-guided SLAMM. Unfortunately, the lawmen interpreted this as an order, and opened fire. A bullet cut the wire, and Quartermain's face turned white as his helmet screen went black.

The missile was now "dumb," out of control, and flying toward the unsuspecting Hulk, who was running after the armadillo.

A fireball briefly lit up the darkened prairie, for an instant framing the Hulk and his foe. Its roar was almost matched by a yell of indignant surprise from the Hulk. The armadillo gave an undignified squawk and jump straight up and landed on the Hulk.

"Quartermain, you jerk!" the Hulk bellowed. *"You are* so *dead!"*

Jones covered his face with his hands. That idiot Quartermain *had* to mess things up.

"Ah," said Sin, tapping the screen. "This is what I talked about. Forty-two has jumped up and is fleeing the vicinity."

"And the Hulk's jumping here," said Jones bleakly. The gray behemoth was headed in the opposite direction . . . toward the van.

"I'm linking the spotlight to the triangulating sensors," Sin said. "That way, we can follow its trajectory without—"

The van rocked violently as the Hulk touched down.

"Now, Hulk, before you do anything rash. . . ." Jones heard Quartermain say.

"Quartermain," said the Hulk with quiet authority, "come here."

"It's not my fault. They were shooting and the wire—"

"Oh, great," said Dale. "Blame us!"

Jones shuddered as he heard the sounds of rending metal, followed by a stifled gurgle.

The Hulk opened the van door. Sin and Jones could see the shaken sheriff behind him.

"Where did it go?" the Hulk asked.

"He's running that way," said Sin, pointing northward. "We have the light on it—"

The Hulk leapt in the direction Sin pointed.

The two lawmen, quietly snickering, helped the fugitive S.H.I.E.L.D. agent into the van.

In a strangled voice, Quartermain said, "Rick, there's a hacksaw in the toolbox."

Jones stood up and shook his head. "Why couldn't you just let him handle that thing?"

Sin had to giggle despite Quartermain's murderous glare. The Hulk had taken the missile launching tube and wrapped it in a bow around Quartermain's neck.

It took the Hulk four leaps to catch up to the armadillo. *For something that big*, he thought, *it sure makes good time*. He overtook the armadillo on the fifth leap, landing directly in its path.

The Hulk braced himself for the impact of the creature bearing down on him. The armadillo's paws flailed about as it skidded to an abrupt halt, stopping no more than two feet from the Hulk. Panting, the armadillo stood trembling on unsteady feet.

"Had enough?" the Hulk said with a sneer.

Number Forty-two gasped once for breath, then collapsed. After a few moments, its quivers stopped and the creature stiffened.

The Hulk lifted the dead armadillo onto his shoulder and carried it back to the van. Everyone was waiting for him.

"I didn't touch it," the Hulk said defensively. "I just chased it and it dropped dead." He dumped the limp creature on the ground to prove his point.

"I suppose it grew too big for its heart," said Sin. "I'll have to do an autopsy."

Sheriff Sowell said, "Dale will get the flatbed to take it to the meat freezer in town." He turned to the trio of adventurers. "Gentlemen, thank you for your help."

"You're welcome," croaked Quartermain. It was apparent that the missile-launcher "necklace" given to him by the Hulk had irritated his throat. Swallowing in obvious pain, the ex-agent glared at the gray behemoth.

The Hulk smiled innocently.

Jones was relieved to get back on the road again.

"Hey Bruce," he asked, "what did Dr. Sin give you?"

Banner held up the photocopied page with a highlighted paragraph. "Before I became the Hulk, I gave a speech at the doctor's school. This is from the school paper—a remark I'd made that I'd forgotten

since then: 'While the results of scientific discoveries may cause fear, ignorance is the far greater menace.' ''

''Not that gamma bombs are any slouch,'' Quartermain said hoarsely.

Banner skimmed the contents of a handwritten note. ''She's already dissecting it. She says here that she has some wonderful theories about what happened. . . .''

Quartermain desperately wanted to forget this embarrassing fiasco. The sooner they got to Kansas. . . .

Then he saw the billboard, advertising the newest product line from Texican Beverages: Armadillo Apple Juice Cocktails. A billboard complete with a monstrous cartoon armadillo, grinning idiotically.

Quartermain floored the accelerator.

LEVELING LAS VEGAS

Stan Timmons

Illustration by John Romita, Sr.

Once upon a time . . .

Las Vegas was just a dream in the desert, a mirage built on a bedrock of bones and sanctified by spilled blood. Her birth was not an easy one, costing her father—a brutal, Hollywood-obsessed gangster—his life in the process, but she's done well for an orphan, relying on the kindness of strangers and raking in an estimated twenty billion dollars a year.

Now she sits like some devil in the wilderness, offering visions of wealth and promises of power. With over fifteen thousand miles of neon tubing, she is a glistening Circe that transforms the normally-prudent traveller into a high-stakes gambler.

All told, Joe Fixit's kinda gal.

Las Vegas still has her looks, and if she no longer has her innocence, Fixit found she had other charms that more than compensated. For instance, even though some thirty million tourists flocked through these gaudy portals annually, none of them ever seemed to recognize Joe.

It's not that Joe was an easy man to forget; in fact, his was one of the better known faces on the planet—good old-fashioned, high-octane, nightmare fuel. But Joe had recently undergone some radical changes. Once, he was a half-ton of emerald fury, a force as raw and destructive as flood or earthquake, with little more intellect than either. But that was back when Joe worked alone, when the world knew—and feared—him as the incredible Hulk.

Nine out of ten cosmetologists will tell you, it's amazing what a few superficial touch-ups like the shedding of a few hundred pounds, an increased vocabulary, and an Armani wardrobe can do to boost one's self-esteem, to make one feel better able to blend in and function within the rigid parameters of polite society.

That, and a shift in pigmentation from green to gray.

People could be so judgmental.

* * *

They call Las Vegas the city that never sleeps, but then, edgy, nervous paranoia can do that to anyone. And the Strip, never quiet, shook with increasing excitement as the night of the ex-champ's comeback bout barreled closer. The broadcast trucks arrived first, snaking miles of cable behind them, erecting lights and mircrowave towers—altars to the twin gods of communication and commerce.

But Joe Fixit didn't mind the distraction. His quarters were high above the din of union laborers, and, although his suite afforded him one of the most spectacular views of the city, he always kept his blackout-curtains drawn tight against the desert sun. Along with his newfound identity, Fixit had developed a severe allergic reaction to U.V. rays: they tended to turn him back into Robert Bruce Banner, alias "Puny Banner," the former brains of the outfit.

But that wouldn't be a problem now; even without looking, Joe knew the sun had just sailed into a bank of clouds, like a gambler's coin falling into a waiting pocket.

"I'm on the clock," he announced to Marlo, showgirl and sometimes companion. She understood: that was Fixit-speak for her to get lost. They clung together like vampires shunning the daylight in his darkened suite, and now he no longer needed her. The night had come around again, and that was all he needed. The statuesque redhead had had many men desire her—and many more hate her because they could never have her—but none had ever been indifferent.

Until now. Until Joe. It was this as much as anything that drew her to an ugly, angry, brutal, moody thug. He had potential, and she thought she could change him, even though her friends all told her that, in any real relationship, the other person has to really *want* to change.

But Joe did not want to change . . . ever again.

He dressed by the neon glow, the color of blood and gold, which he had parted the curtains to allow in. "Lot to do before the fight," he added.

"Who do you think will win?"

"Who do you *want* to win?" he asked, and Marlo knew it wasn't idle chatter, but an offer.

If she answered, Joe didn't hear. He stood regarding himself in the

full-length mirror, setting his hat—its brim as wide as a truck tire—just-so on his apish head. He allowed himself a slight smile, which looked more like a dog curling its lip to snarl. He could dress himself up in two thousand dollar sharkskin suits, but beneath it all, he was still a predator. A Versace hammerhead.

Ah, people, he thought. "Y'gotta love 'em," Joe said, finishing the thought aloud.

"Well . . . thanks, Joe," Marlo answered, smiling broadly. He hadn't noticed her standing behind him, modeling herself in the mirror. "Sometimes I worry they're not big enough."

For a man who had fought the likes of the Sub-Mariner and the Juggernaut to a standstill, it was surprisingly difficult for Joe to remain stone-faced as he headed down to the casino on his private elevator. But once he thought Marlo was well out of earshot, he let his suppressed laughter well up and burst forth in great, gasping whoops.

Mike Berengetti ran a straight game.

He bought the Coliseum Hotel and Casino and tried hard to provide wholesome family entertainment, but it sometimes felt like he was peddling Barney-the-Dinosaur sentiments in a Sam Peckinpah-based economy.

Keeping your shoes clean in a city built on filth and stacks of buried bodies was not easy, nor was it cheap. Mike kept a squad of goons and legbreakers on the payroll to turn trouble away from his door, but sometimes, trouble has a way of crashing the best party.

Trouble, these days, seemed to come in the form of Nick Cloot, manager of the Maggia-owned casino, Kudos. Cloot thought he had better ideas on how the Coliseum should be run, and never missed an opportunity to go head-to-head with Berengetti, locking the most popular entertainers into exclusive contracts, booking the most extravagant stage shows, just so Mike couldn't have them first. Their rivalry made Cain and Abel seem familial when the two casinos entered into a bidding war for the rights to host the ex-champ's comeback bout. It seemed impossible to both men, but somehow, Berengetti outbid Cloot. Nick said nothing; in fact, he had stopped by to offer Mike a hand with the preparations, and that was what set off Mike's internal

early-warning system. Just because he didn't play that game didn't mean Mike was unuaware of the rules.

And nobody played the game better than Joe Fixit. Mike had found Joe weeks earlier, near the Yucca Flats, looking like he'd been turned inside-out and had lost an acid fight. Mike brought him back to the hotel and promised Joe "the best food, best lodgings, best women, best clothes, everything."

"What do I have to do for this?" the gray giant had asked, eyes narrowed doubtfully.

"Nothing. Just beat people up sometimes."

As far as Joe could see, there was no downside to that arrangement. And there hadn't been. In an unusually loquacious moment, Joe told Berengetti, "You're the only one who's never betrayed me, Mike. *Yet.*"

In the hotel lobby, Joe passed Cloot—a young punk with long, tied-back reddish-blond hair—as the Maggia-man left the arena.

"Hey Joseph, when you gonna wise up and come work for a real winner?" Cloot asked with mock-sincerity.

"Yeah, right, live that long," Joe responded.

Cloot laughed, but it was a cold and empty sound, like dry heaves. "I was just talking to your boss, telling him a bedtime story. Maybe you've heard it, 'cause Berengetti sure hasn't. It's the story of the green king and the red king and the white lady they fight for. Every year, they'd fight, and take turns dying. Well, it doesn't take a genius to see the lady is Vegas, and Mike is the green king and I'm the red." Cloot spread his hands, palms-up, when he finished his parable. "Only question is, whose turn is it to die?"

"I used to be a green king," Fixit answered in an apparent non-sequitur. "Wasn't all it was cracked up to be."

Joe fixed the little man with eyes as black as oildrops, and Cloot suddenly appeared to feel the need to be somewhere—anywhere—else. He managed an excuse and hurried away with a pace that was too brisk to be called a walk, and just a little too slow to qualify as a headlong dash.

Grunting in satisfaction, Joe shouldered open the arena doors and

made his way down the sloping aisle to where Berengetti stood by the boxing ring. Mike looked away from the preparations as the workmen hoisted the great row of klieg lights into place high into the rafters.

"Joe," he called, smiling broadly as Fixit approached. "Everything's just about ready here. How's my security?"

Joe pulled a pained expression in response.

"Okay, okay," Mike threw up his hands in submission. Security was always good with Mr. Fixit on the job.

"I got Nelson, Murphy, Corbett, and Hodgson watching things in here while I guard the gate. Those clowns'll watch anything that moves." Fixit leaned against the turnbuckle, looked back over the vast, empty arena. "Gonna be a lot of dead presidents floatin' around here tomorrow night, Mike."

"I know, but I was thinkin' I'd rather have you in here," Berengetti replied. Joe began to protest, but Mike pressed on. "No, listen, I've thought about this: the gate'll be pretty heavily guarded, and it'll be inside the money room, besides."

The money room was a small vault, accessible through only one doorway; the outer door, guarded by floor-to-ceiling steel bars, opened out onto the casino. The first door allowed the money carts entrance into the long corridor, from which point the carts would pass two more steel doors. To enter the third door, the first two outer doors had to be closed and locked. Not only would the money room hold the gate receipts, but the cash from the exorbitant room rentals and heavier-than-usual gambling, as well.

Fixit watched the workers bolt the lighting harness to the catwalk directly overhead. "Did I wake up on the moon this morning? Because I seem to be having some trouble with the local dialect—"

"Huh?" said Mike.

"—because it sounded like you told me to work security in this room and not worry about the gate."

"You heard me," Mike answered. "This is the room the whole world's gonna see on pay-per-view, and I don't want any trouble, I don't want no *hint* of trouble. I want everybody to see Mike Berengetti runs a clean table."

''What trouble are you expecting?'' Fixit asked, and there was the first hint of suspicion in his voice.

Above them, the workmen were having trouble threading the bolts into the locking rings securing the heavy lights. Joe watched their struggle without much interest for a moment, then looked back down at his employer.

''Let's face it, Joe—there hasn't been this much cash ridin' on a match since I took that paternity test,'' Berengetti continued, ''and where there's this much money to be made quick, there's bound to be a lot of underworld figures—''

''What, like Cerberus and Charon?'' Fixit asked, deadpan.

Mike considered a moment before answering. ''I don't know them. Must be east coast muscle. But you get that many slapheads in one room, bettin' that kind of dough, there's sure to be some kind of personality clashes. Most of these guys do not work and play well with others. And how's that gonna play in Peoria?''

''Works great for Jerry Springer,'' Joe answered. ''Look, Mike, I really think—''

''I don't pay you to *think,* you big ape, I pay you to *listen,* and if I say you're gonna work this room, then—''

Joe's arm pistoned out over Mike's head. Berengetti had forgotten just how fast the big man could move, and he was sure he was dead, sure he had pushed Fixit too far. What did he really know about the man?

But Joe Fixit was not reaching for Mike. He had seen the lighting harness uncouple from the gantry and plummet toward the casino owner, and had caught it easily with one Brobdingnagian hand. Joe stood, holding it effortlessly, as Mike resumed his harangue.

''You pay attention when I talk to you!'' Berengetti said. ''Then you work in here!'' Mike, unperturbed as ever, shot his cuffs, squared his shoulders, and turned to go.

''And set that thing down!'' he snapped, wheeling on Joe and pointing to the lighting harness. ''We don't need no trouble with no union!''

* * *

Joe Fixit had spent the last hour sitting in the hotel bar, trying to convince Elvis—all three of him—to invest in Fixit's balloon-animal-angioplasty clinic. He had already sold the Sun Records-years Elvis and the Vegas Elvis on the idea, but the middle-period Elvis was a harder sell.

"Look, it's a scary enough procedure to start with," Fixit argued, "but what if we could do it with a little panache? I'm smilin' now, thinkin' about it. Makes me wish I could have a heart attack." He pointed to a small ceramic bowl set on the bar next to Vegas-Elvis. "Pass the pork rinds, the extra-salty ones.

"See?" Joe said, munching on a fistful of the greasy, fried food. "I'm workin' on a coronary, right now."

"I see what you're sayin', son," Sun-Elvis said, eagerly. "Put on a little show, make the people forget what they're so scared of."

"I like it," Vegas-Elvis slurred. "Maybe dress the doctors 'n' nurses up like clowns. Everybody loves a clown."

"Sure, in the circus," middle-years Elvis countered. "But would they be so happy to have that clown turn up on their doorstep at midnight, with blood on his hands?"

No one answered; there was only silence as deep and still as quarry water.

"Ah, forget it," Joe said, finally breaking the stillness. "You guys got no imagination, that's your problem."

"No 'magination?" Vegas-Elvis parroted, then laughed until his face was the color of a plum. "Tha's a good'un. Son, if I didn' have no 'magination, could I've faked m'own death, then hid out here, pretendin' t' be some *nobody* impersonatin' me?"

Fixit dismissed him with an airy wave of his big hand. "Yeah, yeah, whaddaya do for an encore, invent the wheel?" he said. "Half the people I know have died and come back."

"Have you?" Sun-Elvis asked, his eyes wide with dewy innocence. "Died, and come back?"

"Sure. It's no worse than gettin' the wind knocked out of you," Fixit answered simply. "I'm dead right now, and I don't plan on makin' no comeback."

But sometimes, you don't have a choice, his mind shot back like a

nightclub heckler. *How long do you think you'll stay dead if the pay-per-view cameras get a good shot of your mug when you're guarding the arena? You can just bet that brick-headed Ben Grimm will be watching the fight, and maybe that pretty-boy Hercules, and they can't help but recognize you. . . .*

". . . pressure was too much," Vegas-Elvis was ranting. "Everybody wants too much, fans, lawyers, the Colonel—"

"You guys are lucky," Fixit growled. "You only had a *colonel* bustin' your hump. I had a major *and* a general houndin' me."

A commotion near the entrance of the bar caught Fixit's attention—he always sat facing the doorway of any room he occupied—and he glanced up to see the ex-champ and his coterie enter, more for the sensation it would cause than for any real want of a drink. Of course, it worked. The ex-champ was news, wherever he went. He had spent five long years in prison for assault charges, and was stripped of his title as a result. But now he was out, ready to fight the current reigning heavyweight world champion to reclaim his old title. To restore his *identity.*

Looks like a smaller, dumber version of me, Joe complained to himself. *Thought I buried all those.* He shoved back his chair and stood.

"Now, don' be doin' nothin' rash, son," middle-years Elvis cautioned, spotting the look in Joe's eyes.

"Do I look like a guy who'd pick a fight with some thyroidal moron," Joe responded, "just to make a testosterone-driven point, like I'm the strongest one there is?" He turned and strode across the room before the three ages of Elvis could answer.

The ex-champ turned at Fixit's approach, and his eyes widened behind his polarized sunglasses. For tense, gunslinger-moments, the two huge men stood staring at one another, the boxer's bodyguards and hangers-on anticipating trouble.

But they weren't prepared for what Fixit did next. His somber face broke into a toothy smile, and he issued a sneeringly-accurate impersonation of young Jackie Cooper asking, "Gee, Champ, will you win this fight for me? Please, Champ, *pleeease*?"

The ex-champ relaxed visibly and broke into a grin of his own

that was so wide it seemed his face would split in half. "Well, if you wanted an autograph, you should'a just said so!"

Fixit sighed and watched helplessly as the man signed a bar napkin in big, loopy first-grade letters.

Nobody in Vegas has a sense of humor, Joe thought glumly. *Except maybe Siegfried and Roy. Or Carrot-Top.*

"Thank yuh," Joe said in a creditable Elvis voice as he accepted the napkin. "Thank yuh ver' much."

Clearly pleased with his own act of kindness, the ex-champ nodded politely at Joe, then turned on his heel and left the bar, entourage in tow.

Joe weighted the autographed napkin down with a fistful of loose change and pitched the wadded ball into the huge, central fountain of the Coliseum. As he did, he made a wish that the ex-champ would get his head torn off during the first round, and some kid would catch it and take it home for a souvenir.

Joe had a nagging suspicion this wasn't likely to happen, but that was okay. Joe Fixit was an easygoing type of guy, and if even half of his wish came true, he would be pleased.

Fixit stood by the wishing pond, watching the central plume of silvery water spray and fall, sparkling like dimes. At last he turned from the pool, and as he did, he glanced across the lobby, through the great windows fronting the hotel. On the turnaround, where the limousines of the rich and infamous were parked, a conversation between chauffeurs for Wilson Fisk and Justin Hammer was growing animated, bordering on the likelihood that someone would soon come down with a severe case of lead poisoning.

Joe headed for the entrance to bring a swift end to the discussion. Mike Berengetti didn't care much for gunfights around his hotel—they were bad for business, and generally messed up the family-friendly image he was trying to create.

His attention was so focused on the altercation outside that Joe didn't notice the man who passed him in the entryway. A voluminous overcoat and hat obscured the man's features, even though the night heat was stifling. Beneath his clothing, great slabs of muscle moved like tectonic plates in upheaval. The man crossed the vast lobby and

made his way up the grand staircase, even as Fixit was hitting the asphalt out front.

"Run for your lives, the cretin dam has burst!" Fixit cried to himself in mock terror. He stood watching from his suite, as the movers and shakers began to arrive early for that night's big event. The Vegas Strip had been reduced to little more than a mile-long parking lot, cars clogging the streets like cholesterol blocking arteries.

The sun was westering, throwing long, bruise-like shadows toward the sullen east, but even this failing light was anathema to Fixit. He had bundled up in layers of dark, heavy clothing, a leather greatcoat, gloves, a slouch hat jammed low over his protruding brow, a scarf wound up to the tip of his nose, and mirrored glasses. He felt like a bad impression of Howard Hughes, standing away and above and apart.

Berengetti had buzzed for Joe several minutes earlier, and again as Fixit stood watching the arrivals. He would have to go down soon.

The buzzer sounded again, insistently and impatiently, and Fixit crossed to his private elevator, and descended to the lobby.

The guest in Room 541 rose late and ordered a breakfast big enough to feed a family of bears and lumberjacks: ten steaks, a pound of fried potatoes, a henhouse full of scrambled eggs, a loaf of toasted cinnamon bread slathered with a tub of warm butter, and gallons of hot, black coffee. There was some discussion at the front desk as to the guest's identity, and whether there was really only one occupant in the room. The bellboy, trying to impress Rose, the pretty new girl in housekeeping, boasted that he would find out. He would have tweaked Dr. Doom's plated nose if that's what it took to impress Rose.

But Doom wasn't registered here, and the voice that answered the boy's knock instructed him to leave breakfast outside the door. The bellboy did, then lurked down the hallway around the corner, hoping for a glimpse, but he was both disappointed and astonished. The door opened just enough for a hand as big as Joe Fixit's to reach out and lift the cart into the room. The door slammed shut.

The bellboy moved closer to the door, to try to eavesdrop on any

conversation that might be taking place between the mystery guest and his supposed roommates. But the sounds that greeted him were not those of humans speaking.

They were more like those made by a great beast, tearing into its prey.

Fixit stood well back from the spectators in the arena, hidden in deep pools of shadow from which vantage point he could oversee the entire room. The arena was packed but orderly; the real problems, Joe suspected, would come *after* the fight, when the mob boys reneged on bets, and their systems were so awash with adrenaline tsunamis that eighteen rounds of violence would just be a prelude to the real bloodshed that would follow.

His gaze roamed the room, flicking from face to face. Fortunato. Wilson Fisk. Hammerhead. Big Max Calvada. Justin Hammer. A regular who's who of underworld figures.

Well, Joe thought, *as long as they don't go makin' any trouble, we'll all get along just fine. A regular underworld Woodstock of peace, love and harmony.*

Joe headed backstage and sought out Marlo, watching as she adjusted her card-girl uniform for the hundredth time. This was her big moment, she might be *discovered,* and Joe thought it was funny how the same word could have two entirely different meanings to two different people.

The house lights dimmed and the kliegs over the ring came up, full and bright. Hot-pots carefully placed around the arena erupted in a geyser of controlled sparks and smoke, increasing the excitement. An electric anticipation galloped through the hall, hopscotching from person to person until, finally, a circuit was completed and the crowd was joined as one great, riderless beast.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" the tuxedoed ring announcer began as the first gladiator, trailed by a phalanx of bodyguards and corner men, stalked down the ramp, through the great hall, and climbed into the ring. "The current world heavyweight champion, here to defend his title, 'Terrible' Trace Beaulieu!"

The cheers were deafening, but small in comparison to the cacoph-

ony the former heavyweight champion generated when he entered the ring. "And here to regain his former world heavyweight titles, James 'the Machine' Mallon!"

Fixit remembered his earlier wish regarding the Machine and managed a smile when he spotted a kid sitting at ringside.

But the smile didn't last long. Even above the sound of thunderous applause, he could hear heavy, rhythmic footfalls, like the beating of some monstrous heart, and the brief, chattering admonition of gunfire . . . and the unnatural stillness that followed.

Joe understood the sounds for exactly what they were: you couldn't live your life as he had and not recognize the sounds of trouble. Someone big and with an obvious immunity to lead was using the deafening din of the fight to cover a brazen robbery attempt.

"Sorry, Mike, not my table," Fixit murmured to himself, mentally matching the cry of tortured steel to the bars guarding the money room being ripped apart. "You wanted me to keep an eye out for trouble in here . . . remember?"

An image of Mike Berengetti appeared in his mind's eye.

You're the only one who's never betrayed me, Mike, Fixit thought.

"The others can handle it," Joe replied to the vision. "They can . . . awww, nuts."

No, they couldn't handle something like this. That was why Mike had Joe. Fixit moved up the aisle in great, scissoring strides, shouldering the arena doors open.

The grand lobby was a shambles, as if housekeeping hadn't cleaned up yet after Armageddon. An army of security guards and Berengetti's knuckle-draggers were littered about, broken and unconscious. The trail of ruin led, as Joe knew it must, to the money room. The outer bars were pulled apart like warm taffy, and the massive inner security doors had been unzipped from their hinges. The thief, whoever he was, was still in the vault, loading up on the take from the gate and gambling receipts.

"Room service," Fixit called over the shrieking alarm bells. "I got that case of Heiney-kickin' you ordered."

"You keep it," a voice like Harvey Fierstein with the grippe answered. "With my compliments."

The side of the money room bowed outward, like the prow of a ship, and exploded in a shower of concrete and steel. At the core of the explosion, hurtling through the breach straight at Fixit, was the Rhino.

"Well, at least have your complimentary mint," Fixit said, nonplussed, and slammed his gloved fist into the charging Rhino's mouth. "Or is it bad for your teeth?"

But the Rhino shook it off, lowered his horned head like his namesake, and plowed on faster than Fixit could react, slamming the gray-skinned enforcer across the room and into the casino. Despite his ponderous size—as big as Joe Fixit had been when he was the Hulk—and the addition of plated armor to his outfit, the Rhino was quicker than flowing blood, his augmented strength an equal to Fixit's, and the upper-levels of his stamina thus far unreached.

Fixit disengaged himself from the tangle of slot machines he had been thrown into and flung them like pebbles at the Rhino, who had already turned to flee with the loot. The Rhino stopped and turned. There was more to this gorilla than he first thought.

At the same time, Fixit flexed his mighty leg muscles and propelled himself across the room, driving the Rhino back through the marble retaining wall of the great fountain. Thousands of gallons of water and countless wishes instantly erupted forth, smashing through the lobby like a giant fist, shoving potted melaleuca shrubs ahead of it. The force of the wave banged open the arena doors and water and plants flowed down the aisles.

One of the shrubs thumped against the back of Mike's seat and he turned to look. "What the—?" he growled, and turned to look for Fixit. Mike couldn't see him, but he had no doubt as to where he would find Joe. Mike sloshed up the aisle, eyes widening in astonishment as the expensive carpet squished under every step.

"My carpet!" he bellowed, and then, "My Bruno Maglis!"

A couple of enforcers, curious about Mike's sudden departure, removed themselves from their seats at ringside and quietly followed.

Berengetti arrived in the lobby just in time to watch Fixit and the Rhino, the latter still bearing the heavy bags of cash, break through the outer wall, carrying their battle out onto the circular driveway.

"My lobby!" Mike's litany of financial ruin escalated. "My fountain!" He stopped, his peripheral vision showing him something he didn't want to see head-on, but which he nevertheless couldn't avoid looking at. Berengetti's head snapped around in cartoon-like fashion and his jaw unhinged. "My money!" he wailed, and reeled and clutched at his chest. "Augh, my *heart*!"

The crowd had swollen, joined by spectators from other casinos, washing out onto the Strip to watch what looked to be the true match of the century. Berengetti, ever the showman, did a quick head count, estimated how much he could have made if he'd been able to control the rights to this battle instead of letting it degenerate into a super-powered, bare-knuckle street brawl, and felt his stomach roil with bile and regret.

"What's your game?" Rhino snarled. Fixit's bulky clothing had been shredded in the fight, and he stood revealed and recognized. "When'd the Hulk become a Vegas legbreaker?"

"*Las* Vegas!" Fixit snapped. He grabbed the Rhino's horn and tumbled to his back, dragging the Rhino down with him. Joe lifted his legs, planted his feet square in the Rhino's gut, and flipped him over, slamming his foe back through the side of a gridlocked bus.

Joe leapt up into the breach. The stunned passengers could only watch with growing trepidation as another lumbering man-mountain boarded their chartered bus.

Fixit's eyes scanned the dark bus interior for the Rhino. He found him near the front, holding one of the passengers before him like a shield.

Joe smiled crookedly, his eyes narrowing to slits. Wordlessly, he punched his fingers into the flooring of the bus, ripping up the center aisle and snapping it like a barber's towel.

"Oh, not *this* old trick!" Rhino cursed, pushing his hostage aside so he could keep his grip on the bags of cash. The whipsawing steel tongue slapped him through the great windshield in a spittle of glass and steel.

"And that's why federal law prohibits your standing in front of the white line," Fixit said as he worked his way past the tangle of gawking tourists, twisted flooring, and spilled luggage.

The Rhino was able to drygulch him as Joe stepped to the sundered bus front. Caught off-guard, Fixit had no time to recover as the Rhino rataplanned blow after blow to the back of the enforcer's skull.

"I've waited a long time for this!" the Rhino was whooping through great, bellowing seizures of laughter. "I've waited to pay you back for all the times you beat me—humiliated me! But this is *too* easy! Is that why you're hidin' out here? 'Cause you ain't so tough?"

"K-keep it up . . ." Fixit groaned, blood flowing freely from his nose and the corners of his mouth in a sanguine tributary.

"What's the matter, Joe?" Mike yelled from somewhere nearby. "Quit waltzin' with this bum and get my money back!"

"That big ape yours?" Fortunato asked Mike, and Mike allowed that he was. "Care to make a little wager on the outcome . . . just to make things interesting?"

"That's my money they're fightin' over," Mike snapped back, pointing to the overflowing bags near the Rhino. "Ain't it interestin' enough already for me?"

"You never knocked me down, hornhead," Fixit said, smiling through smashed lips. "You never knocked me down."

The Rhino understood with those words that whatever free ride he had been given was now over, his advantage gone. He knew he should have used the time to flee the scene instead of giving in to old anger and stale grudges. Unfortunately for the costumed criminal, he was not just as strong as a rhino, but about as smart as one, too.

Fixit was aware they had drawn a huge crowd, that it was just a question of time before someone recognized him or the Rhino called him the Hulk for everyone to hear. He had to change the venue . . . now.

There was nothing to do for it but take the battle out to the desert, away from prying eyes and news photographers. Fixit threw himself forward, locking his arms around the Rhino's waist, the colossal impact driving them back, through the front wall, the lobby, the game room, and out through the kitchen of Kudos, as Joe had intended, where they finally crashed down in the litter-strewn alleyway behind the building. Again and again Fixit launched himself forward, not giving Rhino the chance to brace himself for the bone-shattering col-

lision. They were quickly carried out of view of the gathered crowd, lost into the desert night.

And now, Fixit did allow himself a genuine smile as he gave himself totally over to his anger. There was no one to see him, and no one to guess his secret.

Fixit uprooted a cactus with one hand, and with the other, squeezed it like a tube of toothpaste. The enormous pressure caused the quills to squirt out like thousands of flensing knives at the Rhino. The needles couldn't penetrate the thug's armored hide, but several did burrow into the exposed flesh of his face.

Half-blind with pain and rage, the Rhino lowered his head and bulleted toward Fixit, coming down like a judgment. He had room to maneuver now and build up irresistable momentum, perhaps enough to gut even Joe Fixit . . . if his horn had just connected.

Fixit sidestepped at the last moment, gripping Rhino's horn and jerking it down, where it plowed into the hardpan, burying itself—and the Rhino's head—deep in the earth.

''Maybe you should consider changing your name to the Rhinostrich,'' Joe suggested, helpfully.

''What's your angle?'' Rhino cried, wrenching himself free from the stony ground. ''You can still scrap, so why're you hidin' out here?!''

''Guess I was just born to boogie,'' Fixit answered simply.

The Rhino rose to his feet, and paused. The corners of his mouth twitched, tugging themselves into a grin, bowing finally into a smile, followed by a guffaw. ''That's pretty good!'' he said with a laugh. ''I like the new you, Hulkie, I really do!''

Fixit cocked his head, studying his enemy for any sign of duplicity, but, surprisingly, found none. ''You *got* it?'' Joe asked, a little taken aback that someone as rock-stupid as the Rhino would understand his joke.

''Well, duh,'' the Rhino replied. ''You think you're the only one in Vegas—sorry, *Las* Vegas—with a sense of humor?'' He turned to hang the burdensome money bags on a nearby cactus. With its odd, upthrust ''arms,'' the cactus looked like the victim of some desert holdup.

Rhino sat down on a boulder nearby, and indicated Fixit should do the same. The gray-skinned enforcer hesitated, then joined his enemy.

"So," the Rhino said slowly. "Why exactly are we fightin'?"

"I suspect it's because you're tryin' to steal my boss's money," Joe answered. "You have a problem with short-term memory?"

"Yeah, I know how come, but . . . *why*? I was s'posed to give the money to Cloot—"

"*Nick* Cloot?"

"Yeah," the Rhino said. "I was s'posed to steal the money, then tear the arena up in front of the TV cameras, make it look like Berengetti was in deep to one of the east coast bosses and this was payback. Execute his reputation on live TV, and get a gangwar goin' between Berengetti and the coast. Afterward, Cloot'd give me my cut." The armored crook despondently shook his head. "Anyway, why are we fightin' for somebody else's money? Let's just you 'n' me split it, okay? I mean, what do guys like *us* owe people like *them*? What'd they ever do for us?"

High overhead, and somewhere in the distance, they could hear the sound of police search helicopters, their powerful lights punching holes through the desert darkness, like questions seeking answers.

"We don't have much time," Rhino said, standing, reaching for the money sacks. "What do you say? Can I walk?"

"Well, that depends," Fixit said. His face, even in the faint, garish glow of distant Las Vegas, was terrible to behold. "On whether you need kneecaps to walk. . . ."

Toward dawn, Fixit straggled back to the Coliseum, his blood-caked clothes in tatters, his face swollen and distorted. There were still police and FBI agents swarming all over the hotel, so Joe entered unseen through the secret tunnel system and took the private elevator straight to his suite, then down to Berengetti's office.

"Who won the fight?" Joe asked, leaning in the doorway.

"Joe!" Berengetti started. It was evident he had been pacing for hours, nervous enough to fly. "Oh, the fight? Geez, I think both boxers were disqualified 'cause they left the ring to see what was goin' on outside." Berengetti's eyes narrowed to a Clint Eastwood squint

and his lips slicked back from his teeth in a feral snarl. "Who put that Rhino mook up to it? Kingpin? Hammer? Everybody knows Rhino's east coast muscle—he has to be workin' for one of them. Who was it?"

Joe shook his head. "Don't know. He didn't say."

"Well, it doesn't matter, as long as you got my money back." Mike studied the unusual hangdog expression on Joe's face; an unusual expression for a winner, and especially unusual for Joe, since he never lost. "You *did* get it back, didn't you? *Tell* me you got it back, you big, dumb ape!"

"*I* can't," Fixit replied softly, his head hanging low, chin nearly resting on his barrel chest. "I got my butt kicked."

Mike's jaw worked and he tried to speak, managing only air and vowel sounds.

"Oh, and by the way, I'm fine, thanks for asking," Joe added, somewhat petulantly, and turned from the room. Mike deflated into the chair behind his desk.

"Lost . . . my money?" he repeated. He could say the words, as if by phonetics, but could seem to make no sense of them. "Lost it all . . . ?"

Joe Fixit took a long, hot bath in his Jacuzzi, then crawled between silken sheets just as dawn added her glow to the city's own clownish makeup. And then he was asleep in a matter of moments.

He slept easily and deeply, without dreams, on a mattress stuffed with twice-stolen money.

THE SAMSON JOURNALS

Ken Grobe

Illustration by Grant Miehm

My work, my life, is all with the sick—but the sick and their sickness drives me to thoughts which, perhaps, I might not otherwise have.

—Dr. Oliver Sacks

July 8/Reno, Nevada
3:27 P.M.

I've got him. Let's hope I can save him this time.

Six months after the world thought the Hulk dead, I've finally tracked him down in Reno, Nevada. Once Tiboldt and I made it to Reno, it was typically easy to find the Hulk—merely a matter of following the path of destruction from Rick Jones's house. But this time, the trail was surprisingly short.

Even I was surprised at what we found at the end. In my time as the Hulk's friend, enemy, and occasional psychotherapist, I have seen him in several forms. But never like this. Kneeling amidst street wreckage was a shambling, deformed composite of three bodies: Banner's human form, combined with the green-and-gray musculature of his irradiated alter egos.

The last thing I heard from the creature was Banner's voice, after which it reeled back as if struck, and fell unconscious, changing completely to the form of Bruce Banner.

That last exclamation: "*Banner* is the strongest one there is."

Banner won out. Banner.

This may well confirm my hypothesis. For his sake, I hope it does.

July 8/Deane, Nevada
9:30 P.M.

I've found Bruce at an incredibly opportune time, and must work quickly before I've blown my window of accessibility.

For expediency's sake, I've taken Bruce to St. Vinton's of Deane, the closest hospital outside Reno city limits. I had to do some fancy footwork, admittedly. But being a world-renowned psychiatrist/phenomenologist has its perks.

It was a simple matter to contact the head of the psychology department, Dr. Joel Messner, and tell him the following story: That I was working on an important, high-security experiment in the area. I required bed space, office space, and complete confidentiality for myself, my patient, and Tiboldt. In return, I offered, I would be happy to credit the hospital as the place for my studies in the published work. Messner agreed and allowed us space in a secure wing of the facility. I'm not entirely certain I can trust him, but by the time he becomes a problem, I hope to be done and gone.

After setting up Bruce in his room, he brought me up to speed on what's happened since we last met. The fact that Bruce is currently the controlling influence will allow us entree into Bruce's psyche. Now Tiboldt and I can begin work. The sooner the better, I believe, before we've blown our window of accessibility.

Bruce is exhausted from today's ordeal. We'll begin in the morning. This gives me this evening to prepare.

First, a few points of reference:

Everything I have learned about the Hulk has led me to believe that he is a creature of not only separate personalities, but personas, separated all the more by the drastic physical changes associated with each one. The control personality, Bruce Banner, is the original, the human being affected by gamma radiation as the result of a treacherous testing conundrum. Another, universally known as the Hulk, is a seven-foot-tall, half-ton monster of pure muscle, pure power, pure ignorant, childlike rage. The third personality—actually the second by chronology but buried for some time until recently—calls himself "Joe Fixit." Fixit is a behemoth nearly as massive as the Hulk, but possessing sufficient intelligence and subversive demeanor to be treacherous in his own right.

In my many years of attempting to cure the Hulk, I've concentrated largely on the physical: Using repeated doses of gamma radiation, attempting to drain the gamma energy from his body, et cetera. My

more recent studies have led me to believe that the Hulk and Joe Fixit were not created by the gamma bomb, but by Banner himself.

This would explain why I and others like me have attempted, with no lasting success, to "cure" Banner by addressing solely the gamma energy that Banner harbors. Banner's recent breakdown leads me to believe that there are more ingrained issues that must be addressed in order to help him. If I can approach Banner through modern psychiatric means, I may be able to address his multiple personalities and, in so doing, cure him in a lasting, permanent fashion.

It has occurred to me that I have not yet mentioned the true identity of Tiboldt in my notes. Maynard Tiboldt is a specialist I have recruited to help me in my analysis-related endeavors. He may be better known as the Ringmaster, the leader of the infamous Circus of Crime that subtly terrorized audiences nationwide for some years. Maynard is a master hypnotist with a proven record of being able to hypnotize superhumans, even one as powerful as the Hulk. By pulling a few strings—more like yanking, actually—I had him released from jail on my recognizance.

More than ever, I now have the opportunity and the means to save both Bruce and the world from his destructive alter egos. I think I can cure Bruce Banner.

July 9/St. Vinton's
5:47 A.M.

Just noticed I've worked through the night in preparation for today's initial analysis. It may well be for the best; it's allowed a significant block of time without distraction. Tiboldt seems to have slept through the night. Bruce as well—no mean feat for someone who fears drastic transformations on a nightly basis.

Checked tape recorder. Fresh batteries. Plenty of pens, paper, etc., courtesy of Messner. He brought them in himself, in an attempt to ingratiate himself to me—and make a few clumsy inquiries about the

work. A bit of a weasel. It's amazing how many I've encountered in the psychiatric community who take me for a fool because of my physique.

Going back over my notes to confirm my starting point today. Gamma radiation at the level Bruce received has one of two effects to the human body: fatal cellular decomposition (e.g., cancer), or super-human-level mutation. Of the latter cases, it can increase their intellect dramatically, as it did Bruce's long-standing enemy the Leader. For others, such as the Abomination or myself, it increases their physical strength while leaving their intellect intact. All of the latter group's cases are similar in that while the gamma radiation's effects range on the bizarre, they are typically wholly transformative.

Neither the Abomination nor I have ever "changed back." The Leader reverted to his normal human form only when he lost his cellular gamma stores. Banner, however, changes constantly—three different bodies, no less. In addition, each form carries a separate personality. I believe the key to his problem is Multiple Personality Disorder.

In a standard Multiple Personality Disorder case, the mind uses certain methods to physically establish its various alternate personalities, or "alters." Usually, these bodily changes are limited to decreased or increased eyesight, coordination, nervous tics, etc. Banner's gamma-irradiated cells take this lead from these multiple personalities to instigate wholesale physiological changes. Hence, the root of Bruce's problem lies not in the gamma radiation (as I had believed for many years), but in Bruce's mind. I believe that Banner's psyche harbors personalities who have taken advantage of the gamma radiation to create actual physical forms for themselves.

Maynard will prove invaluable with the means of analysis I will attempt to perform upon my patient: to conduct individual sessions with each personality, without the gamma-powered metamorphosis. In short, we will attempt to talk with Banner, the Hulk, and Joe Fixit, each time from Banner's body. It's safer for Bruce, Tiboldt, myself, and the hospital. Tiboldt and I have discussed the particulars; we believe we can do it.

As regards analysis technique, Bruce is a special case. I'm forced to combine standard psychiatric analysis with a more informal approach. Bruce is the most receptive to the work, but possibly the least open to standard therapy. The Hulk may well be open to both methods, but standard analysis may be lost on him. Ironically, from what I know about him, Joe Fixit may be the most open to a tight weaving of both.

Tiboldt and I will start later this morning, with the Hulk alter as our first subject.

July 9/St. Vinton's
9:00 A.M.
INTERVIEW #1: HULK

[AUDIO TRANSCRIPT]

SAMSON: Hulk, do you know what a memory is?

HULK: Me-mo-ree?

SAMSON: Yes. Here's an example: Let's say you pet a pretty bunny this morning . . .

HULK: Where is the pretty bunny?

SAMSON: There aren't any bunnies here, Hulk. It was just an—

HULK: Why did you say there was bunny?

HULK: Hulk wants to pet pretty bunny!

<pause>

SAMSON: Hulk, was there a time when you petted a bunny?

HULK: Yes. In the desert. Um. Before.

SAMSON: Okay. Are you thinking about it now?

HULK: Huh? Of course, Hulk is thinking about it!

SAMSON: Good! *That's* a memory—when you think about something you did before!

<pause>

HULK: Oh.

SAMSON: Now Hulk, I'm going to ask you an important question. What's your first memory?

HULK: Huh?

SAMSON: Hulk . . . what's the very first thing you ever thought. In your head.

HULK: Hulk want to be left alone.

SAMSON: Very well. We can continue this . . .

HULK: No! First memory. Hulk want to be left alone.

SAMSON: And were you left alone?

HULK: No! Soldiers come. Soldiers attack Hulk. Soldiers use guns.

SAMSON: Do you remember what you did?

HULK: Hulk made soldiers go away.

SAMSON: Did you hurt the soldiers?

HULK: Made them stop bothering Hulk. Hulk smash soldiers! Hulk is strongest one there is.

<pause>

HULK: Where are you keeping bunny from Hulk?

July 9/St. Vinton's
11:30 A.M.

It was at this point that I made a mental note to edit the Hulk's audio transcripts. Suffice to say that Hulk's thought process seems to be centered around the following: "Hulk Just Wants to Be Left Alone"; "Hulk Hates Soldiers"; "Soldiers Always Use Guns"; and "Hulk Smash." Oh, and "Hulk Likes Bunnies." John Steinbeck, eat your heart out.

However, as maddeningly circular as this first session turned out, it did reveal several important points. Most important, though not noted in the transcript, the Hulk does not seem to share any memory with his other two personalities. Hulk has no memories—no matter how rudimentary—of any of Bruce Banner or Joe Fixit's experiences. This would imply a distinctly separate personality.

In addition, the Hulk seems a being without remorse for the targets of his devastating power. Unsurprising for the Hulk, but surprising when applied to a scientist who suffered constant derision from his army employers for his pacifist leanings.

July 9/St. Vinton's
12:30 P.M.
INTERVIEW #2: BRUCE BANNER

[AUDIO TRANSCRIPT]

SAMSON: Okay, Bruce. Let's start by—

BANNER: Leonard, I just want to say, before we begin, that I appreciate all you've done. Thank you for all your help.

SAMSON: Don't thank me yet, Bruce. Let's lick this thing first. Are you ready to begin?

BANNER: <deep breath> Let's.

SAMSON: I thought we might start with your parents.

BANNER: Oh, come on, Leonard. You're not dealing with an amateur. You're not actually going to start with "tell me about your mother," are you?

SAMSON: Humor me, Bruce. Just think of it as a way for us to start the dialogue.

BANNER: <sigh> All right . . . My mother was . . . well, she was beautiful. And kind, and gentle, compassionate . . . She took care of me, until my father hired Nurse Meachum . . . who barely paid attention to me, wouldn't hold me when I cried, left me wet for hours . . . Last I heard, she'd moved to South Carolina to live with some sister of hers who made her pay—

SAMSON: Bruce.

BANNER: Hm?

SAMSON: Your parents?

BANNER: Oh. I saw them so rarely, Leonard. My mother especially. I'm fairly certain my father kept me from her, actually. I remember my mother as a very loving woman . . . a woman of great compassion, endurance. I suspect she had to be strong in the face of her duress. <laughs to himself> I suppose she was much like Betty in that regard.

SAMSON: Do you see Betty as being under the same kind of hazard?

<pause>

BANNER: No. I suppose not.

<pause>

SAMSON: Well, what sort of similarities do you see between—

BANNER: Leonard . . . I'm eternally grateful that you're helping me. You've been tireless in your efforts to try to cure me of the Hulk . . . I also realize that we're closer to accomplishing that goal than we've ever been. But please . . . I don't want to talk about Betty.

<pause>

SAMSON: Bruce. I don't mean to press, but I'd prefer that we didn't hold anything back now. I'm sure you'd agree that too much is riding on this.

<pause>

BANNER: I don't want to talk about Betty . . . with *you.*

<pause>

SAMSON: Can we at least talk about why you don't want to discuss her with me?

BANNER: I'd have hoped that you'd understand why by now.

<pause>

BANNER: It's a failing. Sometimes I can't help but dwell in the past.

<pause>

BANNER: I guess that's why I'm seeing a shrink. <short chuckle>

July 9/St. Vinton's
4:00 P.M.

The balance of my session with Bruce, though lengthy, unearthed little. As is wont to happen in many standard therapy sessions, Bruce and I went around a variety of subjects a few times. We reaffirmed that Bruce shares no memories with the Hulk or Joe Fixit. This came as no surprise, as Bruce has often related stories of his "waking up" somewhere, quickly discovering that immense amounts of damage had been caused by one of his alters.

Bruce was consistently quick to avoid subjects involving his father. I don't find this much of a surprise, given his history: His father, Brian Banner, constantly abused both wife and child. Then, when Rebecca Banner attempted to take Bruce and leave her husband for good, he murdered her in a fit of anger. Bruce learned to fear anger at an early age, and fear his father more.

It is not unusual for Bruce to avoid this painful subject. What did surprise me was the way he did it initially—by using the subject of his wife Betty against me. It's true that an infatuation I harbored for Betty led to my first failure in my attempts to cure Banner of the Hulk. But that was years ago, and I've proved my dedication to Bruce—as well as my objectivity in his case—several times over. Either he's harbored resentment for me all this time, or he's becoming uncomfortable with my line of questioning. If so, he is unconsciously erecting defenses that will hold me at bay within the context of our analysis. It's an irony—and to Bruce's detriment—that his own intelligence is allowing him to avoid approaching the very issues that

may help him. Still, I am optimistic about gaining progress with Bruce.

I only wish my optimism held for my next session. While I aspire to complete objectivity, I must admit to a certain amount of distrust for Joe Fixit. His stature and intelligence level would imply that he was actually the first alter to make its post-gamma-bomb appearance—a brutal, devious creature with much of the later Hulk's raw power but none of his naïveté; Hyde to Banner's Jekyll. Fixit had become the "host," or "control personality" for several months culminating in the subject's six months in Las Vegas. This was the most recent stretch of any length of time one of Banner's alters had maintained control of the body. Fixit's input may well be invaluable.

July 9/St. Vinton's
6:00 P.M.
INTERVIEW #3: JOE FIXIT

[AUDIO TRANSCRIPT]

FIXIT: You look a little nervous, Doc. Don't be. I'll bet there isn't a serving of fava beans and chianti in this whole dump.

SAMSON: I'm not nervous in the least, Joe. May I call you Joe?

FIXIT: No. You call me Fixit. How you doing, Maynard?

TIBOLDT: Just fine, er, Fixit.

<Fixit motions to Tiboldt's hypnotism device>

FIXIT: That the same carny hypno-device you used in your sideshow act when I'd kick your butt for pickpocketing?

TIBOLDT: As a matter of fact, it's vastly improved, as you should plainly—

SAMSON: Maynard. Please. He's taunting you. Fixit, I'd appreciate it if we kept the conversation between you and I.

FIXIT: You're the shrink. I'm just here on a group discount.

SAMSON: Fixit, how old are you?

FIXIT: Ooh. A straight shooter. I like that. Roughly twenty-five years, more or less, Doc. Y'know, the gamma bomb explosion. Hell of a birth.

SAMSON: That's curious. The gamma bomb explosion wasn't nearly that long ago.

FIXIT: Oh. Must've miscounted. Oops. Got any more fascinating questions?

SAMSON: Let's try this one: What's your first memory?

FIXIT: Jeez. My very first memory? Tough one, Doc. I was such a widdle bitty Hulk at the time—

SAMSON: Are you going to answer the question?

<pause>

FIXIT: Well, it—it's difficult, I must admit. Let's see. It must have been junior year. I had Susan Jacobson in my room, we were going at it pretty heavy, and I was just about to reach around and unhook her—

SAMSON: Look. Maybe we should change the subject.

TIBOLDT: Do we have to?

SAMSON: Maynard . . .

FIXIT: Hey, Maynard—rough guess, over the years, how many of your bones you think I've broken?

SAMSON: Fixit, we're not here to talk about Maynard.

FIXIT: I thought you wanted to change the subject! Look, Lenny—I'll talk sports, I'll answer whatever stupid questions you want. To be honest, I welcome any chance I get to be without my roommates. You got questions, lay 'em on me. You don't like my answers, go screw. But don't waste my time with this touchy-feely crap. Capisce?

July 9/St. Vinton's
10:12 P.M.

Well. That was an ordeal. Three hours of playing the straight man in Fixit's derisive vaudeville sketch. Not a pleasant scenario for a psychiatrist.

But a fascinating one. Fixit's crack about being born twenty-five years ago . . . would have put Bruce Banner at college age—the same timespan Fixit set that story about Susan Jacobsen. Perhaps there are grains of truth among the crap Fixit's spreading.

July 10/St. Vinton's
8:35 A.M.

Got called into Messner's office this morning, to hear him scream at me. Says he finally remembered where he'd heard the name Maynard Tiboldt before. Finally I.D.'d him as the former Ringmaster of

the Circus of Crime that played the small towns for years. Asked me how dare I bring a known criminal into his hospital. I explained to him that Tiboldt was on loan from a correctional institute, helping me on a goodwill program. I assured him that neither Messner nor the hospital had anything to fear from him.

Fortunately, my explanation placated him sufficiently. He reluctantly conceded and left with one eyebrow raised. I stifled the urge to lower it for him.

July 10/St. Vinton's
11:00 P.M.

A breakthrough. A major breakthrough, I think. Dreading another question-and-answer exchange with the Hulk, I decided on using the Frohmin photo exercise—a means of coaxing identifications by using a series of photos. The Frohmin is a newer test, usually used to gauge media saturation in preschoolers. It's generally used as a simple, immediate means to illicit response, measure recognition, and analyze a child's naming rituals. I felt pictures might be a potent way to communicate with the Hulk.

The transcription follows. I've added notes throughout.

[AUDIO TRANSCRIPTION]

[photo 1: Rick Jones]

HULK: Is Rick. Rick is Hulk's friend. Hulk likes Rick.

[photo 2: The Rhino]

HULK: Is Horn-head. Hulk likes Horn-head.

SAMSON: You *like* him?

HULK: Horn-head likes to fight Hulk. But Hulk is stronger than

Horn-head. Hulk always wins. Hulk likes to smash Horn-head. Horn-head is weak. But he always comes back for Hulk to smash.

SAMSON: I see.

HULK: Hulk is strongest one there is.

SAMSON: Yes, I know.

This exchange revealed a fascinating detail: Though the more violent and simplistic aspects of his nature are still obvious, the Hulk also exhibits a comprehension of relationships and more importantly, the ability to reflect on them. The simple comment that in some way the Hulk actually "likes" one of his most consistent enemies reveals previously unrecorded depth—even if his reason is that he likes to brutalize and dominate the person in question. Could this imply a trickling-over of consciousness from Bruce—or Fixit?

[photo 3: Igor Kaledovich, Bruce Banner's assistant the day of the fateful gamma blast.]

HULK: Hulk not know.

SAMSON: You don't recognize him?

HULK: Hulk not know who he is.

SAMSON: What if I told you he was a scientist? Does that help you know who he is?

<pause. Hulk is focusing intently on the photo.>

HULK: No. Hulk not know.

Interesting. Igor is infamous to Bruce Banner as the Russian

double-agent who posed as Bruce's assistant, and by whose treachery Bruce stumbled onto the gamma bomb test that turned him into the Hulk. Arguably, the man in this photo is responsible for the single most tragic moment in Bruce Banner's life. And yet, the Hulk shows barely a spark of recognition of him. This reinforces for me that Banner and the Hulk do not have a shared memory, and therefore have distinctly separate personalities. Made a note to explore this further with Fixit.

[photo 4: myself]

HULK: Huh. Is Green-hair. Is you.

SAMSON: Very good, Hulk. And what do you think of the person in this picture?

HULK: Hulk likes Green-hair. Hulk knows Green-hair helps Hulk. But sometimes Green-hair tries to hurt Hulk.

SAMSON: How does Green-hair hurt you?

HULK: Sometimes with machines. Sometimes Green-hair traps Hulk. Green-hair is smarter than Hulk. But Hulk always escapes. Sometimes Green-hair fights Hulk. But Green-hair fights bad. Heh. Maybe Green-hair is weak.

SAMSON: <clears his throat> Very well, Hulk. And who is this?

[photo 5: Bruce Banner]

HULK: Is BANNER! Puny BANNER!

Almost immediately upon seeing the photo of Bruce Banner, the Hulk flew into a rage. In this case, ''flew'' is a relative term, as Tiboldt ensured me that the hypnotic suggestion placed in the Hulk's

mind ensured that he would not make any sudden moves or violent motions.

I had truly hoped I could trust him on this.

TIBOLDT: Samson! He's resisting my hypnosis!

HULK: HULK HATES PUNY BANNER!

SAMSON: Can't you increase the dosage?

TIBOLDT: I'm not a pharmacist, Samson. I'll increase the speed of the hypno-wheel and see if that works.

It didn't. Banner's limbs tensed and shook. His face turned red from increased blood flow, then green. Bad news. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Tiboldt edge toward the door.

The Banner/Hulk clenched both fists. His chest muscles tensed, then expanded.

HULK: HULK SMASH!

TIBOLDT: <expletive deleted>

SAMSON: Maynard, you open that door and all the Hulks in the world won't stop me from finding you.

Maynard and I watched in fear and intrigue as the sheer power of Hulk's hate fought the work of one of the most powerful hypnotists alive. Veins bulged from his neck and arms. His muscles began to crawl, then morph. I shot out of my chair into a defensive combat stance, ready to restrain the Hulk if possible.

As Rick Jones might say, "Shhyeah, right."

But before the Hulk could raise his head fully, his eye caught sight of something on the floor. He yelped as if stung, his anger suddenly draining away like air from a punctured raft. His skin tone and musculature returned to normal.

HULK: Hulk stop. Hulk sorry. Hulk be good.

As I turned to replace the chair, I noticed what the Hulk had looked at to give him such a shock. It was my stack of photos, now spilled upon the floor, all turned face down but one in plain view, uncovered by the others.

The picture in question was Photo 11: Dr. Brian Banner. Bruce Banner's father.

As I pondered this, Banner, who remained in Hulk-mind, rocked in his chair, hands folded, and continued to mutter meek apologies into the space in front of him.

HULK: Hulk be good. Hulk is sorry. Please don't hurt Hulk.

I heard Maynard exhale loudly. It wasn't until then that I realized I'd been holding my own breath.

July 12/St. Vinton's
4:13 A.M.

Going back over my notes to help determine the results of the Hulk's Frohmin test. Perhaps it's the late hour (not to mention my sporadic sleep patterns), but I can't help but take a self-centered slant to my current train of thought. Have I been, in fact, hurting the Hulk, as he'd implied? The diverse occasions I've tried to help him have, for the most part, involved abduction, submission, and a variety of drugs, techniques, and technologies, both experimental and conventional. Rarely, if ever, has it occurred to me, that I may have done him more harm than good. My intentions were always philanthropic. It had never occurred to me that I might have caused the Hulk undue pain and anguish.

That little crack of Bruce's about Betty didn't help either. Have I been remiss, or worse, misguided in my methods?

Fortunately, this current line of therapy is considerably more humane than my previous attempts. Hence, this conundrum is more of

a personal one, and is therefore of a lower priority. Best that I pursue it after finishing my work with Bruce.

Make a note to try and speed up the sessions if possible. This is far too late to be staying up and reviewing materials. Most men would be begging for sleep at this point.

If consorting with Bruce's relatively normal psyche wasn't refreshing, I'd find it irritating. Whereas the Hulk doesn't know better and Joe Fixit takes amusement in analysis, Bruce seems to put up actual, if instinctual, resistance.

July 12/St. Vinton's
2:30 P.M.
[AUDIO TRANSCRIPTION]

SAMSON: Bruce, MPD can occur as early as age five or six, sometimes earlier. It usually comes as a defense to trauma, even at that age.

BANNER: Interesting. <sigh> Well, it's no surprise that my mother's death was a source of trauma. But still, Leonard, do you think that a single event like that, even one that trau—

SAMSON: It's often triggered by abuse. A history of abuse.

<pause>

BANNER: I'm sure you can understand, Leonard, that's a very tender subject. Can we really risk touching on any subjects that might cause me undue stress?

SAMSON: I usually take a great deal more time and caution during analysis. But you and I both know that we don't have the opportunity for either. Maynard's here, I'm here, and you seem to be in control of your alters for the first time

in recent memory. But we don't know how long this could last. And we can't afford to wait. Frankly, if there's any time we can do this, it'd be now.

<pause>

SAMSON: Bruce, I can't impress upon you how important it is at this stage—

BANNER: He *hurt* me Leonard, okay? Is *that* what you wanted to hear? He hurt me like no one else ever will. The Abomination, the Leader, Glenn Talbot, the <expletive deleted> Gremlin, that crusty old <expletive deleted> Ross—

SAMSON: Bruce—

BANNER: No one's ever hurt me like Brian Banner! He bullied me, beat me. Called me a monster, Leonard. I'm five years old and that—that *animal* is knocking me down and calling *me* a monster! And no, Leonard, I don't *know* how many years it lasted for. But it probably started from when I could first remember and ended *the day he went to jail for killing my mother . . .*

SAMSON: *Please*, Bruce—

BANNER: *NO!* That's what you wanted to *hear,* wasn't it? Is that what you're trying to drag out of me with your clumsy prodding and rote questions? You want to hear that my father abused me, just to justify your theories?

<pause>

BANNER: No. Don't say it. Don't even bloody say it. Just take your pound of flesh and spare me the biopsy.

July 12/St. Vinton's
4:19 P.M.

Bruce grew increasingly fatigued and irritated, and asked to stop the session in order to turn in early. Because of the rigorous nature of that day's analysis, I consented. Despite the tone of the session, a triumph. I've gathered the necessary information from Bruce to establish cause for MPD. Despite my coarse—though necessary—methods, I have presented to Bruce perhaps the single most formative subject of his entire life's experience, and hopefully, helped him to understand how it may well be the source of his problems. But on top of it, I have made a startling observation. This exchange provoked tears, raised voices, anger. But nothing more.

He didn't change.

Possible the most intense (uncovering), verbal exchange of his life, and he remained Bruce Banner.

Though it may be once again at the cost of his pain and anguish, I am heartened by my subject's progress. (Banner may be able to serve as the anchoring persona, after all.)

July 13/St. Vinton's
3:03 A.M.

Stayed up late working again, decided on an early-morning jog around the area instead of sleeping. Came back to find Bruce waiting for me, disturbed, wishing to talk. Though this wasn't an actual session, he consented to my recording the exchange.

BANNER: Leonard, you're going to merge my three personas, aren't you? My three personalities?

SAMSON: I won't be able to decide that without more data, Bruce. It may be an option.

BANNER: Wait a minute. If you do, how can you guarantee that

I'll be the dominating personality? Or . . . can you guarantee me that I'll be part of the personality at all?

SAMSON: Bruce, anything's a possibility at this point. Don't—

BANNER: What if I'm not? What if Fixit or the . . . Hulk is the only persona left? Would I die?

SAMSON: Bruce, calm down. There's no information that would imply that. After all, you're the root personality. I can't actually give you hard facts on this—

BANNER: I don't want hard facts! I want you to tell me whether or not I'm going to live through this!

<pause>

SAMSON: Bruce, this is not an exact science. I don't have charts and graphs to show you. But *if* we decide to manipulate, merge, or remove personalities, I am convinced that your persona will *at least* figure heavily into the ultimate result. Now please, go back to sleep.

I took him back to his room, whereupon he slept soundly until morning.

I am sorry that he forced my hand on the issue. The concept of the merging personalities—and the toll it implies—weighs heavily upon him. However, my condensed time frame allows me limited opportunity for subtlety. Despite my training, I am having difficulty empathizing with him. This is but one trauma on a road of traumas, leading to his ultimate well-being. I'm reluctant to stray from that road.

After he awakened, I decided to spare him for the day and interview Fixit instead.

July 13/St. Vinton's
6:05 P.M.

Probably due to his ability to share group memory, Fixit has suddenly taken an interest in the methods and goals I had just discussed with Bruce. I saw no reason to hold it back from him, particularly since any conversation with Fixit may draw him out further. He took the bulk of our time to campaign for himself as the reigning persona.

FIXIT: So tell me, Doc. Who of the three of us is most like a person? What's the criteria here? Which of us has held down a place of residence for any length of time? Or a job? I'll tell you one thing, Lenny—it ain't Banner. He's got a big hole in his resumé that reads, "wandered planet and beyond, possessed by monstrous alter ego and somber theme song." There's only one of us who's remained in one place long enough, and you're looking at him. Sort'a.

SAMSON: Make any friends?

FIXIT: Nope. You?

SAMSON: We're not talking about me.

FIXIT: Awww . . . what's wrong Doc? Afraid once I know who they are I'll find 'em and kill 'em? Smart man.

SAMSON: Some might suggest a lack of conscience would indicate a lack of wholeness.

FIXIT: Yeah, thank you, oh Ancient One. Lemme show you my all-seeing Eye of—

SAMSON: All right, then, doesn't it bother you that you don't have your own body?

FIXIT: What are you talkin' about, Doc? I *have* my own body. Gray skin, built like a concrete dump . . . Nobody else'd want a body like that. Banner tried it once or twice, he didn't like it. Betty's not too fond of it either, if you know what I mean. Marlo, on the other hand . . .

<pause>

FIXIT: Okay. Enough stand-up. Let me tell you somethin', Samson. That gamma bomb gave me life. Then, for whatever reason, I hadda go bye-bye—for *years*—just cause'a whatever was going on in poor little Brucie's head. For the last six months, I've just been livin' the life I deserved. A *real* life. And I'm gonna let you pull the plug on me? I'll tell you one thing, Doc—I ain't going so easily.

SAMSON: I hate to break it to you, Joe, but you might not have much choice in the matter. Everyone from me on up to S.H.I.E.L.D.'s tried everything else to cure the collective "you," and it's resulted in thousands of lives lost and billions in property damage. So now we're trying it this way.

FIXIT: You're beginning to sound like that brown-nose Talbot. Y'know what he'd call it? "Losses." "Hits." "Solutions." Y'know what he meant? Murder. Ever occur to you that you don't want to cure all of us, just wanna kill off me and big green? You think taking us out of the equation is gonna bring back the dead? All those people who were unlucky enough to have the last thing they hear be, "Soldiers attack Hulk? Hulk Smash"?

<pause>

SAMSON: I'm just trying to prevent any more, Joe—including

yours, by the way. You want to call it murder, I say fine, even coming from a loathsome beast like you. But consider it self-defense.

FIXIT: Self-defense? Bull, Samson. It's euthanasia. It's culling. Don't call it what it isn't. You're using your power to lower the odds. And if there's something I know about, it's power. I remember every punch we've thrown, every tank we've crunched, every life I've taken, whether we've meant to or not. Think about who I've got in me, Doc. I've got a big green destruction machine with the brain of an Olsen twin, I've got the man who created the most powerful weapon in the world . . . and I've got little old me. Who've you got in you, Doc?

<pause>

FIXIT: Aw, come on . . . there's not that many "gamma-spawned *accidents*" roaming the Earth, now are there, Lenny? Why'd you irradiate yourself in the first place? Power. How'd you get to be such a noted monster doc? Power. You think I don't remember why you got yourself all juiced up? Come on now, say it with me . . . power.

<pause>

FIXIT: It's *wasted* on you, Samson. You've spent it tailing my purple seat when you could do whatever you want with it. Love whoever you want to love, take whatever you want to take—

<page from the hospital intercom>

PAGE: Dr. Samson. Dr. Leonard Samson. Please dial extension 236 immediately. Dr. Samson—

FIXIT: —hate whoever you want to hate . . .

July 14/St. Vinton's
2:31 A.M.

God help me for what has just happened this night.

I didn't mean for it to happen. I just lost control.

It started when Messner interrupted my session with Fixit to call me into his office. Transcript follows.

[AUDIO TRANSCRIPT]

SAMSON: Messner! What is the meaning of this? You interrupt me in the middle of my work, you *page me by name*—

MESSNER: Don't get so self-righteous with me, Doctor! That's Bruce Banner you've got in there, isn't it?

SAMSON: Messner, the identity of my patient—

MESSNER: —must be preserved. Yes, I know. I assured you that you and your personnel would be kept secret. I didn't say anything about monsters! Samson, are you so clueless that you have no idea what could happen to this hospital if the Hulk went on a rampage?

SAMSON: Doctor, I promise you, as I did before, I have everything under complete control. All I need is a couple more days to—

MESSNER: I can't believe what I'm hearing! You have had the Hulk under my roof for *three days* now! Do you have any idea what kind of risk you are putting my hospital—my patients under? Please don't tell me that you're as dumb as you look.

<pause>

SAMSON: That was unnecessary, Doctor.

MESSNER: What is unnecessary, *Doctor*, is the liability I am taking by harboring you and your little sideshow. A particularly unequitable one, at that. However, if you and I can come to terms, it needn't be.

SAMSON: I beg your pardon?

MESSNER: I have a proposition for you. I haven't bothered telling anybody about your presence here . . . yet. That page was local to your suite of rooms. However, it illustrates my value to your project, don't you think?

SAMSON: Messner, if you think—

MESSNER: Shared risk for shared benefit. Cut me in on the credit or I blow the whistle.

<pause>

MESSNER: Don't be stupid, Samson. I can be your friend here. All I ask for is a little compensation for my trouble. I'm risking the lives of my staff, my patients, just by harboring that maniac. But, I'm willing to do that for a share of the glory.

<pause>

SAMSON: Messner. You insist, despite my assurances, that my patient could cause great damage to your hospital. But, you're willing to risk that for fame? Who's the monster here?

MESSNER: If you like, we can let the authorities decide, Samson. Don't be stupid. Take the deal. I'll give you until morning to decide.

[END TRANSCRIPT]

Seven hours to decide. Felt very, very tired. Considered getting a bit of sleep, but decided instead on a desert jog to clear my head. I often find that a good cardiovascular-driven increase in my body's metabolic rate, coupled with a subsequent ingestion of bulk nutrition (i.e., food) will often suffice in place of actual bodily rest.

Having said that, perhaps first and foremost I felt driven by the urge to run.

What follows next is terribly, terribly simple. I was so engrossed with my thoughts that I didn't notice the jeep. I had stumbled across a platoon of soldiers on night maneuvers in the desert. The jeep plowed into me, costing the Army one jeep and two injured but (fortunately) living soldiers. Their support helicopter swooped in, fearing the worst. And perhaps they'd found it: A gamma-irradiated metahuman, hounded by soldiers who prevented it from just being left alone.

Me.

I crippled the 'copter, spared the soldiers, and escaped.

Now here I am, back at the hospital, counting the hours. I have four-and-a-quarter left. Less if the soldiers find me.

July 14/St. Vinton's
4:38 A.M.

Three hours, twenty-two minutes.

I can't decide. I can barely think. I almost killed humans tonight.

Men. I meant to write "men."

Have I had a dark, violent side, waiting to be given access, vent? Am I a monster?

I drown in memory, of the mistakes I've made. Or rather, the mistake.

From the first time you saw Betty and Bruce, you knew they had to be together. That's what inspired you to devise a plan to save her life and cure him of the Hulk, so many years ago.

But was it, Samson? As soon as you got the chance, you used the excess gamma energy siphoned from Bruce on yourself—and you know why. You wanted to be a super hero. A man of mind *and* muscle. Doc Samson, the gamma-powered super-shrink. And what did you do as soon as you achieved your comic-book fantasies? God help you, you made a play for Betty Ross.

You felt like a kid with a new toy, didn't you? And you just had to test it out. But the test didn't work out how you planned, did it? Sure, you got your first lesson in super-powered humility by getting snubbed by her. But not before Banner re-exposed himself to gamma radiation out of sheer jealousy.

You were weak, Samson. And it cost you the soul of a good man, a fellow scientist.

But more than that, it cost the lives of soldiers and civilians all over this planet. Hell, all over the universe. *That's* why you've been trying to save Banner. To atone for the thousands of lives destroyed by the Hulk since your mistake. Since your failings.

Now you're condemned to a life on the run. A hell that starts in less than three hours.

Trapped with no one to turn to.

July 14/St. Vinton's
5:04 A.M.
[AUDIO TRANSCRIPT]

SAMSON: Fixit.

FIXIT: Bit early for analysis, isn't it, Doc?

SAMSON: Fixit, before, when you said I had others in me—

FIXIT: Oh, that. I was just try'na make a point, Doc. Banner and the cabbage and me, we need to be more like you. You've got it together, Doc.

SAMSON: What?

FIXIT: Look. You've been at this stuff almost as long as us, only you've fought the good fight, see? You've proved that the gamma-rad doesn't corrupt outright. It doesn't make you evil and it doesn't have to make your demons real.

SAMSON: Doesn't it? After tonight, I'm not so sure.

FIXIT: Oh, come on. You got some humans scared of you. They shot at you. You made 'em stop. Boo hoo. Occupational hazard. Hell, you're a gamma boy, like us. Between that and your wardrobe I'm surprised you don't get in more—

SAMSON: All right, Joe, I get the point.

FIXIT: First, you get me to a phone. Then I call up Siegel General and we get a room.

SAMSON: I've never heard of a Siegel—

FIXIT: 'Course you haven't. It's only available to folks in my . . . profession. Y'know, away from the authorities. And they aim to keep it that way, if you know what I mean. They take a lot of after-hours patients like me with no questions asked. Lord knows I've put enough of 'em there. Guy on the board owes me a favor. He'll give us cover and all the time we need. Oh, but you might need to take out the main generator here, to cover our escape. Bring Maynard to zap people if you don't wanna take

'em out yourself. I'd help, but I seem to be in the body of a wuss.

SAMSON: I'm not comfortable with this. With trusting you.

FIXIT: Have you figured out yet that I'm smarter than I look? I need you, Doc. I've tried to ace both'a these rubes myself. If I've got pole position in this head and I can't get rid of 'em, then we need this crap solved, one way or another. We need you and Maynard to try something else—maybe try mergin' us. We talked about it, Doc. You're the last chance.

SAMSON: You . . . talked about it?

FIXIT: Didn't know about that, didja? Just me & Brucie, really. I still wanna prove to big green he's got a glass jaw, but Banner's been keeping us apart so far. Can we leave now? I'm getting the itch to pound someone and I'm sick of Banner's whining.

July 14/Ben Siegel General Hospital, somewhere near Las Vegas 11:00 A.M.

Without a hitch. We narrowly escaped the Army because we waited to make sure the backup generators kicked in. I insisted on that.

I am pleased that Joe's plan worked, rattled by the fact that I listened to him in the first place, and truly amazed that he is in fact not Joe Fixit or rather, not "just" Joe Fixit. He's Bruce Banner, a man with the mind of a genius, the eye of a hitman, and the heart of a child, split into three distinct parts—though perhaps, if I have anything to say about it, not for much longer.

My fault was in discounting each of the three personalities. Each represents a valuable part of Bruce Banner's psyche; each has something to offer. Each is a part of the whole.

So here we are, sequestered in an unknown mob hospital, preparing to merge the three personalities into one whole person. A single, whole, gamma-powered entity. Like me.

Hell, he could do worse.

PLAYING IT SAFE

Keith R.A. DeCandido

Illustration by Herb Trimpe

Inside a modest-sized house on the outskirts of White Plains, New York, a man sits before his computer in a specially reinforced chair needed to support over a thousand pounds of weight. It is an effort for him to type lightly enough that he doesn't smash the keyboard every time he touches it.

It took him a long time to adjust, but he manages. Barely.

He works as a freelance consultant, putting his scientific expertise to use for cash wired to an anonymous account set up by a friend. His wife is presently at Richards College, where she teaches Religious Studies.

The names on the lease to this house are Robert and Elizabeth Gaynor, but the names are as false as the impression that he is just a simple freelance consultant.

The man at the computer is, in fact, Robert Bruce Banner, one of the foremost experts on gamma radiation in the world—and also the incredible Hulk.

At the moment, Bruce and his wife Betty are living the lives of fugitives, taking on assumed names and trying not to draw attention to themselves. Despite some recent public incidents, they've managed to stay in White Plains for some time. Betty loves her job. Bruce is content with his consulting work.

They're happy.

Robert Bruce Banner has been happy before. He knows it can't possibly last.

Major Nefertiti Jones knew something was wrong when she saw that the door to Colonel Sean Morgan's office was closed. The head of SAFE always kept it open, on the theory that it made the tiny office a bit more roomy. SAFE—an acronym for Strategic Action For Emergencies—was a relatively new government agency founded to deal with threats of a paranormal nature beyond the capacity of conventional organizations. It was headquartered in a Helicarrier, a mobile flying fortress in which space was at a premium.

"Come in," said Morgan's muffled voice, in response to Jones's soft tap on the door.

Jones entered the room.

"Major, have a seat." Morgan indicated the guest chair. He was poker-faced as always, expression placid under his close-cut sandy hair. Only his wintry gray eyes gave away any emotions: those eyes, Jones knew, said, *We've got a serious problem.*

Then she noticed the face on the viewscreen that filled one wall of Morgan's office. That face was pale, with red hair cut almost identically to Morgan's, and wearing smoky, green-tinted glasses. This explained why Morgan called her by the formal "Major," rather than the more familiar "Nef" he used in private.

"Major, I believe you know Henry Peter Gyrich of the NSA?"

"We've met," Jones said. Gyrich was the head of Operation: Wideawake, a National Security Agency project designed to control the so-called "mutant menace." Jones first met him when she was with S.H.I.E.L.D., an organization similar to SAFE . . . although one with more funding.

Gyrich nodded his head. "Major. As I was telling Colonel Morgan, we have a situation—though it sounds as if you already knew about part of it."

Jones looked to Morgan in confusion.

"Mr. Gyrich called in order to inform me of a possible double agent within SAFE."

Jones's first thought was, *Oh, God, not another one*, but said nothing aloud. SAFE had recently been infiltrated by two agents of URSA, a group dedicated to re-creating the old Soviet Union. The group, working with the gamma-irradiated creature called the Abomination, had killed several legitimate SAFE agents, framed the Hulk for the murder of a senator, and almost blown up the Russian embassy in New York.

Gyrich said, "Colonel Morgan then asked me if the mole was Agent Lucia Spilimbergo, to which I said yes."

Jones blinked in surprise. "Spilimbergo? That new lab kid?" Spilimbergo was one of a half-dozen agents recruited after the URSA disaster.

"I've actually suspected her for a couple of weeks," Morgan said. "Her actions have been a little off-kilter, and she's been making inquiries she shouldn't have. I wasn't completely sure, so I've been sending some false information her way, waiting to see how it played out. However, there seems to be more to it than meets the eye." He looked over to the viewscreen.

Gyrich said, "I flushed out Spilimbergo after checking the results of the psi-scanner."

Jones had a fairly good knowledge of the inventory of SAFE's Helicarrier, and didn't remember such an item on the list. "What psi-scanner?"

"It's a device that can detect unauthorized uses of telepathy," Gyrich explained. Jones assumed it could detect authorized uses as well. "I had them installed at the HQs of all U.S. intelligence organizations."

"Without," Morgan added, "informing said organizations." From anyone else, the phrase would have come across as sour, but Morgan spoke matter-of-factly.

"You know now," Gyrich said in a like tone. "In any case, we expected to find telepaths hiding out as spies. What we found in *your* HQ were telepathic waves travelling *into* the Helicarrier. Specifically, to Spilimbergo. To my way of thinking, that says mind control."

Jones let out a breath. "So Spilimbergo might not be responsible for her actions?"

"That's the theory," Morgan said. "The question now becomes, who's doing the controlling?"

Gyrich looked at his watch. "I have to get to a meeting, so I'll leave that figuring to you. I trust, Colonel, that you'll keep me advised of your progress in dealing with this."

Morgan simply nodded.

"Good. Gyrich out."

As soon as the viewscreen faded to black, Jones shot Morgan a look. "Since when do we report to *him?*"

"This sort of thing *does* fall under the NSA's bailiwick," replied Morgan, "though whether it's Gyrich's little corner of the NSA is up

for debate. Never mind—we already know who the puppet master is: the Leader.''

Wondering why he waited until Gyrich had signed off to reveal this, Jones asked, ''Excuse me?''

''I just got the latest computer report on Spilimbergo's actions. She's been asking the database a lot of questions about gamma-powered people in general and the Hulk in particular.''

Jones blinked. ''So she knows where the Hulk is?'' At Morgan's nod, she added, ''But she isn't cleared for—''

''No, she isn't. I was all set to move on this when Gyrich called and added his little wrinkle. That's why everything points to the Leader. Mind control of this sort is right up his alley, and he's got a history—one might say an obsession—with gamma-types, what with being one himself.''

Jones rubbed her chin thoughtfully. The Leader began life as Samuel Sterns, a perfectly ordinary manual laborer. Then he was exposed to gamma radiation and—like so many before and after him—was transformed into something more than human. In Sterns's case, it raised his intellect to super-genius levels and gave him a measure of telepathic abilities—including, Jones recalled, the ability to control the mind of anyone he touched.

Aloud, she asked, ''So what're you gonna tell Gyrich? I assume you didn't tell him about the Leader 'cause you didn't want him to know that we know where the Hulk is?''

Morgan nodded. ''If I tell him that, he'll drag those Hulkbuster Mandroids out of mothballs and blow up White Plains. I'll deal with Gyrich later. Right now, I have two concerns. I'll deal with the internal stuff here—I want you to take five of your Special Tac Squad and go warn the Hulk.''

''Only five?''

''I'd rather not make a scene unless we have to. Too big a team will draw attention.''

''Then why not just call him or send one person?''

''In case there *is* a scene, I want you prepared for it. Load for bear, Nef—the Leader tends to employ nasty customers.''

Jones nodded. ''We'll be ready in twenty, Colonel.''

* * *

"I do not believe this," Betty Banner muttered as she sipped coffee from a mug.

Jones said nothing in reply, but merely sipped her own coffee. She had decided to take a simple approach, leaving the rest of the team behind in the hovercraft—hidden behind a ridge a couple of hundred feet from the "Gaynor" house—and going alone to explain the situation to the Banners in person.

Jones had been invited in and offered coffee by Mrs. Banner—a lean, athletic woman, with straight hair whose red hue came from a bottle. She had just returned from a day of teaching, and so wore a frilly purple silk blouse and black linen pants. They had gathered in the medium-sized living room, Jones on the couch, Mrs. Banner in a large armchair, and Dr. Banner—all seven feet and eleven hundred and fifty pounds of him—standing in the corner as unobtrusively as his size and green skin and hair would allow. As was his wont these days, Dr. Banner wore a black tank top and beige slacks; idly, Jones wondered where on Earth he shopped for clothes at his size. *But then*, she thought, *anything's better than those purple pants.*

"Is there anything you can do?" Mrs. Banner asked.

"We're working on it," Jones said. "For now, we're concerned for your safety."

For the first time since Jones arrived, Dr. Banner spoke. "I'd be more worried about Sterns's safety if I were you. Where is he?"

"We haven't located him yet."

"Isn't he supposed to be dead?" Betty asked.

Dr. Banner shook his head. "I've seen him shot, stabbed, and blown up more times than I can count, and he keeps coming back. He's suffered every mortal trauma short of me ripping his head off—an option I will seriously consider when I find him." He cracked his knuckles, creating a sound that reminded Jones of machine-gun fire.

"Right now, our main concern," Jones said, "is who the Leader might send after you. His mole only gained this information within the last twenty-four hours. We're ready to back you up as needs be, or to help you relocate."

Mrs. Banner turned to her husband. Jones knew the woman's back-

ground: she'd been through more in her life than any twelve people should ever have to deal with. In the last year alone she'd given birth to twins who had died, been kidnapped by a renegade Hydra agent, been in the Russian embassy when it was taken over by revolutionaries, and almost been charbroiled by the Super-Skrull. That she hadn't gone completely crazy was a testament to her strength, and Jones had to admire her.

"Bruce, I don't want to leave here," she said with the determination of a homesteader in an old Western who wouldn't let the evil cattle rustlers run her off her land.

"Betty, listen, we—" Banner started.

"I'm tired of running, Bruce! It seems like that's all we've done since we got married—hell, it's all I've done since I met you. But I've been *happy* here. I like teaching at Richards, I like being here with you. I don't want to lose this because of some vague threat."

"Sterns is never vague, hon. If he's trying to track me down, he's gonna send someone after us."

Before the conversation could continue, Jones's wrist unit beeped. She looked at it to see the LCD provide an image of Agent White, one-fifth of the squad she'd brought along. "Major, we have a situation. Four bogeys heading straight for your location in some kind of hovercraft—and before you ask, the hovercraft doesn't match any of the configurations in our database."

Jones had assumed as much. White wouldn't have called them *bogeys* if they were the Avengers. "What kind of bogeys?"

"Paranormal—beyond that, all I can say for sure is that they aren't mutants and aren't gamma-enhanced."

"All right, stand by, but be ready to move." She turned to the Banners. "I'm afraid the decision's been taken out of our hands. I suspect that whoever's approaching intends to attack."

"Let them," Dr. Banner said, moving toward the front door. "Major, if you'd be so kind as to get my wife to a safe location . . ."

"Wait a minute, Bruce," Mrs. Banner said, standing. "You're not—"

"Major, we've got an ID," White's voice sounded from Jones's communicator. "It's the U-Foes."

Dr. Banner rolled his eyes. "Figures. Last time I tangoed with those Fantastic Four wannabes, they were working for Sterns. I can take care of them."

"Maybe, but my orders are to back you up, Dr. Banner, and I intend to. Before we left the Helicarrier, I did a check on all of the Leader's known lackeys and stockpiled the hovercraft's arsenal accordingly—including some weaponry that will help against the U-Foes."

Dr. Banner then moved across the living room to the front door in two strides.

No, Jones realized, they weren't strides. A stride is a step that carries the entire body along. Dr. Banner moved twenty feet in two small, economical steps—so small, in fact, that it seemed more like the house moved itself seven yards to the south to accommodate the incredible Hulk rather than vice versa.

"Do what you want, Major. Just stay out of my way." With that, he opened the door and walked out.

Jones sighed with relief. Although the Hulk and SAFE had crossed paths thrice in the last few months, Jones was only in on one of those encounters. She had half-expected him to cop an attitude and make Jones's life more difficult.

She brought her wrist communicator up to her lips. "Let's move, people. White, you get over here to keep an eye on Mrs. Banner." Jones glanced over at the woman to see that she was rooting around in a box. She eventually produced an old Army-issue revolver. Jones smiled. "She can take care of herself, but I'd rather she had some backup in case the U-Foes try to get to Banner through her.

"Elfman, Bartholomew, take up positions on the perimeter of the battle area. Elfman, take the harpoon for X-Ray; Bartholomew, the Chem-3A for Vapor. Banks, you stay in the hovercraft. Your job is to contain this as much as possible. You three wait for my signal. Montenegro, you get to handle crowd control until the local cops get here, and then work *with* them on it. I want zero civilian risk, got it?"

Banks spoke for the team when she said, "Understood, Major."

Jones turned to Mrs. Banner to see her checking her weapon to make sure it was loaded and ready. The Hulk's wife said, "I'll be

fine until Agent White gets here, Major. You go help Bruce.'' She held the gun with all the assurance of the Army brat she was, and her face reminded Jones of the gang leaders on the streets of Los Angeles—the ones who lived to the age of thirty, that is—though the effect when combined with her elegant work clothes was almost comical.

Looking out the living room window, Jones saw Dr. Banner standing on the sidewalk, looking up. The major followed his gaze to see a flying craft head toward the ground, carrying four odd-looking passengers. White hadn't been kidding about the craft's unfamiliar configuration. Nefertiti Jones worked for the LAPD, the CIA, and S.H.I.E.L.D. before joining SAFE, and had seen all manner of flying vehicles. None of them matched the sleekness and elegance of the craft the U-Foes rode.

Dr. Banner painted a nice big green target for the U-Foes to center their attention on, so Jones decided to take the sneaky approach and go around back, not letting the U-Foes know she was there until the last possible second.

As she exited through the back door and moved around the house, she reviewed what she knew of the U-Foes: A quartet led by a mid-level industrialist named Simon Utrecht, who tried to duplicate the accident that gave the Fantastic Four their powers. This was back when Bruce Banner and the savage version of the Hulk shared a Jekyll-and-Hyde existence. Banner stumbled across Utrecht's mission control and forced the rocket to land before the cosmic radiation killed the passengers. However, the cosmic rays had done their work well enough to turn the four of them into super-humans. For lack of a better name, they called themselves the U-Foes, and proceeded to have a rather undistinguished career as super-villains against the likes of the Hulk and the Avengers.

Jones took up a position behind an overgrown privet hedge. *This thing needs to be pruned*, she thought. She tried to imagine the Hulk in a straw hat, whistling while he trimmed the hedges with an oversized pair of clippers. The image wouldn't take.

The U-Foes disembarked from the hovercraft, which they had put down in the middle of the street. Dr. Banner stood on the sidewalk

in front of the "Gaynor" house, shaking his head, arms folded across his barrel chest.

"Simon, Simon, Simon—why must you keep doing this? Doesn't my constant beating you guys into cutlets get boring for you? I know it does for me." He yawned.

Vector—the super-villain who once had been Simon Utrecht—stood at the front of the foursome. He was a tall, skinny figure, wearing an ugly yellow-and-orange suit patterned with what Jones assumed were supposed to be a representation of molecules.

"Do not mock us, Hulk," Vector warned. "We have a mission, and you will not stop us from performing it."

"Kind of a comedown for you guys, isn't it?" Dr. Banner asked. "I mean, the big-shot head of Utrecht Industries reduced to playing errand-boy for the Leader."

"Enough jabberin'," said Ironclad, a large man covered in a chrome-like substance that made him look like the Silver Surfer on steroids. "Let's get stompin'!"

"Yeah," said X-Ray, floating in the air above his teammates. His entire body glowed an eerie red color, but his voice sounded like that of a teenager trying desperately to sound cool.

Vapor, an attractive brunette, said nothing. She simply transformed her body into a green gas.

"Y'know," Dr. Banner said calmly, "I was having a pleasant afternoon, diddling around on the computer, welcoming my wife home, and you guys had to ruin it. You've made me extremely cranky. And you wouldn't like me when I'm cranky."

Switching her wrist unit to surveillance mode, Jones saw that White had entered the house and taken up position in the living room. The others were positioned around the perimeter, waiting for her signal.

Dr. Banner continued, "C'mon, guys—I beat you when I had the intellect of a five-year-old, I beat you when I had the intellect of a genius, and I beat you when I had no intellect to speak of. What makes you think today will be different?"

Vector smiled. "Only one way to find out." He raised his hand. Vector generally used his ability to repel any kind of matter or energy by pointing.

Jones unholstered the nine-millimeter she'd been issued when she joined the LAPD. It still came in handy every once in a while. For all his power, Simon Utrecht was still just an ordinary man in an ugly suit. She fired.

Vector staggered backward, clutching his shoulder.

Then all hell broke loose.

Vector stumbled to the ground, still clutching his shoulder, which now bled rather profusely.

Vapor and X-Ray moved toward Dr. Banner, who remained where he was, arms still folded.

Jones started toward Vector, hoping to restrain him, but Ironclad cut her off.

Then Banks took the hovercraft out of hiding and fired on Ironclad. It didn't hurt the brute, but it distracted him long enough for Jones to whip out her laser pistol and fire it at the ground beneath Ironclad. The blast weakened the pavement enough for it to collapse under the U-Foe's weight.

Banks took advantage of Ironclad's immobile state to take a few more shots at him with the hovercraft's weaponry.

As soon as Vapor and X-Ray got close to him, Dr. Banner clapped his hands. The displaced air sent X-Ray tumbling head over heels through the air and dispersed the gas cloud Vapor had turned into.

X-Ray recovered quickly. "Now you're dead meat, Banner. See, *I* know how to stop you."

"Really?" said Dr. Banner with a smirk. "You'll succeed where entire armies and dozens of super-villains—including yourself—have failed?"

"Yup. See, all I gotta do is hit you with the right frequency of gamma radiation—" X-Ray then pointed at Banner "—and you'll revert to Bruce Banner."

Gamma radiation being invisible, the only effect of X-Ray's attack Jones could see was that Dr. Banner started to glow a bit greener. Then the jade giant just laughed.

* * *

Vapor coalesced into human form alongside Vector before Jones could reach him. The major recalled that the two of them were lovers.

"Vector," Vapor said, "are you all right?"

"The mission," Vector gasped in pain. "Must complete . . . mission. . . ."

Jones walked up to Vapor and aimed her laser pistol at the woman's head. "Please, Ms. Darnell, don't move if you don't want to get hurt."

Vapor laughed. "You? Hurt *me*? Do you know who I am?" As she spoke, she once again started to form into whatever kind of gas she thought might incapacitate or kill Jones.

"You're a woman who can change into any gaseous substance, which makes you pretty vulnerable," Jones said calmly.

"Vulnerable?" Vapor's voice sounded from the cloud that floated toward Jones. "Don't make me laugh."

"Didn't plan to. *Now*!"

At her shout, Bartholomew fired the Chem-3A at Vapor.

Dr. Banner reached out and grabbed X-Ray's arms. His tank top was in shreds. "The old tricks don't work on me, kid."

"B-but the Leader said—" X-Ray stammered.

Before the youngest U-Foe could finish his sentence, the Hulk—it was impossible to think of him as "Dr. Banner" now—whirled him around and threw him toward the ridge to the east—the same ridge behind which the SAFE agents had hidden the hovercraft.

In front of Jones, Vapor's gaseous cloud suddenly turned into a weird-shaped rock and fell to the ground.

"Nice shot," Jones said. Bartholomew simply smiled in reply. Elfman trotted over, carrying a modified harpoon gun that fired a lead-mesh net. "You two find where Banner threw X-Ray and restrain him."

They nodded and went off.

Jones placed a set of handcuffs on Vector's wrists. The U-Foes' leader seemed to be going into shock. Not surprising, given the amount of blood that was flowing from his wounded shoulder.

* * *

That just left Ironclad, for the moment. Unfortunately, Banks—a good pilot with comparatively little field experience—had made the mistake of getting in too close, giving Ironclad a chance to grab the hovercraft. He didn't have great leverage, crammed as he was in the hole in the street, but it was enough to knock the 'craft off course and send it careening into the very privet hedge that Jones had initially taken refuge behind.

The Hulk smiled. "Why thank you, Ironclad. I'd been meaning to trim that."

Ironclad clambered out of the hole and faced the Hulk. "Yeah, well, now it's your turn t'be trimmed, greenie. Just you an' me, now. Irresistable force an' the immovable object."

"The Leader been giving you comic books to read, eh?" The Hulk once again cracked his knuckles. "There's something you all keep forgetting."

Jones spoke into her wrist unit. "Banks, come in! Russel, are you all right?"

The sound of coughing issued from the tinny speakers, then: "I'm fine, Major, but this 'craft is shot to hell. Morgan's gonna have to call us a cab."

Meanwhile, the Hulk swung a right hook at Ironclad, who blocked it—leaving him wide open for a left uppercut, which sent the silvery super-villain flying down the street.

The Hulk leapt to where Ironclad had skidded to a halt.

"I'm *stronger* than anyone," the Hulk growled. He grabbed Ironclad by the chin and picked him up. "I'm *tougher* than anyone." He punched Ironclad again, sending him in the same direction in which he'd sent X-Ray. "And I'm *smarter* than anyone."

Jones followed the Hulk as he took another flying leap to finish Ironclad off. She noticed that Montenegro was successfully keeping the civilians far back, and that the local cops had shown up and were forming a roadblock.

Jones ran through the wooded area that the Hulk had leapt over, coming out at a clearing to see the Hulk pounding Ironclad into the

ground—literally. It was like watching a big green hammer being applied to a chrome tent peg. About twenty feet to the northeast, Bartholomew and Elfman watched appreciatively. Behind them, X-Ray struggled with the lead net, to no avail.

A trifle winded, Jones approached the Hulk. "Finished?" she asked, between deep breaths.

"More or less, yeah." He turned to Jones. "What, exactly, did you do to Vapor?"

"You ever hear of a guy named Chemistro?"

The Hulk shook his head, which actually created a small breeze.

"Fourth-rater from New York. Mixed it up with Power Man a few times, then went straight. He sold the patent for his alchemy gun to the government."

"Alchemy gun?" the Hulk parrotted skeptically.

Jones shrugged. "That's what he called it. It can change the chemical composition of certain substances. We based the Chem-3A on it, and it changed Vapor from whatever gunk she turned into to . . . uh, *solid* gunk."

The Hulk nodded and scratched his nose. "Very scientific. And I see you found something to hold Fallout Boy over there."

"I don't get it!" X-Ray shouted. "The Leader said this'd be easy! He said that frequency of gamma radiation was *guaranteed* to revert you back!"

"Well, butthead," replied the Hulk, "I'd *say* that the Leader was playing you for fools, but that would imply that you four jackasses could possibly be played for anything else. Now—"

The Hulk was interrupted by a huge thunderclap that came from the direction of the street his house was on. Before Jones could react, the Hulk leapt back over the treeline.

Jones ran in the same direction, barking back at her men, "Stay here and keep an eye on these two." Then she put the wrist unit to her lips. "Report."

Montenegro replied, "Major, that guy on the ground broke through the cuffs. Then he just lifted his finger and the whole house collapsed."

Oh, hell, Jones thought.

Then she heard a plaintive cry from two of the most powerful lungs on the planet: "*Betty!*"

Jones arrived at the street to see Montenegro, Banks, and two local cops all holding guns to Vector's head; Vector lying on the street with a big smile on his face, his cuffs in pieces on either side of him; and the Hulk tearing through the massive pile of wreckage that used to be a modest, one-story house.

"Major, I'm sorry, I didn't get to him in time," Montenegro said without looking at Jones—she refused to take her eye off Vector. "White and Mrs. Banner are still in there."

Vector said in a dreamy voice, "Mission—accomplished." Then he fell unconscious.

Muttering a stream of curses she'd learned growing up on the streets of South Central Los Angeles, Jones followed the Hulk into the wreckage.

She found him kneeling over two bodies—White's sprawled over Mrs. Banner's. A large chunk of wood protruded from White's neck.

"Betty's alive," Dr. Banner said. "Looks like your man saved her life."

"Yeah," Jones said. She'd had comrades die before. It would happen again. She'd never get used to it. *At least he went down doing his job*, she thought, but that provided little comfort.

What followed was cleanup. Luckily, the restraints designed to restrict super-powers had survived the hovercraft crash and were applied to three of the U-Foes.

"What about her?" Montenegro asked, pointing at the rock that was Vapor.

Bartholomew said, "Just leave her as is. We'll revert her when we get back to HQ."

The mention of HQ reminded Jones that she needed to check in. The communication system in the 'craft was shot; she hoped the wrist units' limited range would be good enough. Morgan had said he would bring the Helicarrier nearer to New York. . . .

Sure enough, Morgan replied; Jones gave him the full story.

"How's Mrs. Banner?" Morgan asked.

"Injured. An ambulance is on the way."

Morgan shook his head. "No, that'll draw even more attention. I'm sending Clyde down with another 'craft to take you back—we'll treat Mrs. Banner on the 'carrier."

A voice rumbled, "Is that Morgan?"

Jones looked up to see the Hulk approaching her. X-Ray's barrage had all but destroyed his tank top, and his pants were torn in several places as well. Aside from that, and his mussed-up hair, there was no evidence that he'd just been in a fight—no scars, no abrasions, nothing.

Must be handy to be almost invulnerable, Jones thought. In response to his question, she nodded, and held up her wrist so he could see Morgan's image.

"Morgan, you are going to tell me that you've triangulated Sterns's location, and that you're going to give me that location, correct?"

The colonel looked bemused. "I am, am I?"

"Don't get cute with me, Morgan," the Hulk shot back. "I want Sterns, and I want him *now*."

Before Morgan could reply, Jones said, "With all due respect, Doctor, if you're thinking of charging into the Leader's hideout with a full head of steam—think again. After he blew up your house, Vector said, 'Mission accomplished.' I don't think the U-Foes were after you directly, I think they were here to make you mad enough to go off half-cocked—so they blew up your house and hurt your wife. Now, you told Ironclad that you're smarter than anyone, so use those brains. You go charging in, you're playing right into the Leader's hands."

Dr. Banner scowled at her. "Maybe. But I'm tired of his little head games. He wants me to go charging in—fine, I'll go charging in. The alternative is to sit around waiting for him to send another bunch of losers after me." He turned to look at the colonel's image on the small screen. "Morgan, tell me where he is so I can go pound him."

"So *you* can go pound him?" Morgan repeated, still bemused.

"This is my fight—my life that Sterns has messed around with. Give me the location, take care of my wife, and stay the hell out of my way, do you read me?"

"Oh yeah, I 'read' you," Morgan replied. "And in the unlikely

event that you are elected president of the United States, I will consider your word to be my command. Since that hasn't happened yet, understand this: your wife is alive right now because of the sacrifice of one of my agents. If you imagine that I'm just going to sit on my hands and play doctor for Mrs. Banner while you go and storm the Leader's den alone—'' Morgan paused to take a breath. ''Well, then you have a *very* vivid imagination.''

Dr. Banner stared at Morgan's image for several seconds. Then he said in a tight voice, ''Do you know where he is?''

Morgan turned to address Jones. ''The psionic waves that controlled Agent Spilimbergo emanated from an abandoned limestone mine just outside a small Pennsylvania town called East Brady. There are, however, two problems. One is that the waves have stopped. The other is that we've had to arrest Spilimbergo—she dug into a file she shouldn't have and set off several alarms. I'd say the Leader knows we're on to him now—assuming he hasn't always known from the get-go, which I strongly suspect.''

''You have a latitude and longitude on this town?'' the Hulk asked.

Morgan stared for a moment, then consulted something on his desk. ''It's on the Allegheny River: 40.59° north by 79.36° west. The limestone mine itself is on the other side of the river from the town, about two miles down—'' he peered closer at the desk ''—Route 68. We'll meet you there.''

''Just don't get in my way.'' Dr. Banner stepped back and leapt westward. He was out of sight within three seconds.

Jones then noticed that Montenegro had been standing behind Dr. Banner.

''He can find it based on latitude and longitude?'' Montenegro asked. ''With no equipment?''

Unable to contain a smile, Jones said, ''Don't let that gruff exterior fool you, Lupe. He's still one of the biggest brains on the planet.''

''I guess. So now what?''

''Now,'' Morgan said, causing Jones to start—she had briefly forgotten about the colonel—''you wait for Clyde to bring you back up here. I'm taking a team to meet Banner at that mine.''

"*You're* taking?" Jones said with only mild surprise. Morgan had never been above leading a field mission himself.

"No choice. You're busy, Ballard's still in the hospital, and Fein's still pulling the Vault back together after the Thinker mess."

"All right. Good luck."

"Thanks." Morgan's face disappeared.

Jones looked up to see another hovercraft approaching. "Lupe, you and Russel get Mrs. Banner prepped for transport."

Montenegro nodded and went off to carry out her orders. Jones looked up at the sky in the direction the Hulk had leapt.

Good luck, Doctor, she thought. *I think you're gonna need it.*

SAFE Agent R.B. Hayes sat impatiently in the copilot's seat of the short-range hovercraft. Once they got going, they would reach the Leader's apparent base in minutes. But they couldn't leave until Colonel Morgan arrived.

Hayes looked forward to this mission, and not just because he enjoyed going out in the field. Sean Morgan's policy of taking the "science types" into the field rather than confining them to the laboratory ("If they can't survive in the real world, they don't belong in this line of work," he had said) was the primary reason Hayes left his job as an FBI lab tech to join SAFE.

But he particularly wanted this field assignment because of the Hulk.

Hayes had met Bruce Banner in college when he was an undergrad and Banner was working on his doctorate. He had one of the most amazing minds Hayes had ever encountered—and also one of the most unassuming physical presences. The pudgy undergrad could sympathize at the time, and continued to after that mind was forced to share its existence with a barely articulate savage.

But now that intellect lived on inside the savage's body. To Hayes, it was the best of all possible worlds, and it beleaguered the hell out of him to see Dr. Banner reduced to a fugitive's life when he could be doing so much more. R.B. Hayes deeply envied Bruce Banner his current existence—it was the dream of every ninety-nine-pound-

weakling of a science geek to find himself with a Charles Atlas physique. Banner had achieved that dream.

Morgan finally arrived and took the pilot seat. He said nothing as he went through the checklist, then guided the 'craft out of SAFE's Helicarrier.

Hayes looked down at the bank of equipment in front of him, specifically to the display from the GammaTrac on the monitor. "Sir," he said to Morgan, "I'm afraid Dr. Banner's going to beat us there by a few minutes."

Morgan nodded.

They flew over a rather pleasant, almost pastoral area. Miles of greenery and hills, broken by the occasional road, house, or creek. One road stood out—Pennsylvania Route 68, according to the map, which ran mostly parallel to a creek and a railroad track—and Morgan piloted the craft over that, landing in front of what was once probably a thriving limestone mine. As they landed, Hayes saw the two deep vaguely foot-shaped indentations in the ground that marked the Hulk's arrival.

Then Hayes heard the scream.

"Let's go," Morgan said. He led the charge, followed by five agents. Two held back, as did Hayes.

The screams grew louder.

Hayes followed the two agents in slowly, making sure he remained between and behind them. He consulted his handheld GammaTrac, but saw only one blip. If the Leader was here, he was long gone—or had figured out a way to hide the unique radiation signature that he shared with all gamma-irradiated creatures from the scanner. With the Leader, one was as likely as the other.

The sound of laser fire joined the screams. Hayes heard Morgan barking orders, but couldn't make them out.

Hayes examined one of the computer terminals that lined the walls, but found absolutely no data. Not even an operating system. The terminal had power going to it, but it had no software that he could find.

The trio soon came upon a large clearing, and saw the remaining SAFE agents firing at three large robots that shot out long metal spikes.

Then Hayes caught sight of the Hulk and gasped. Over a dozen spikes jutted from various parts of his body, green blood oozing around them. *Those things must be made out of adamantium to penetrate his hide*, Hayes thought.

Banner was trying to pull the spikes out so his healing ability could take care of the wounds, but even with that, it had to hurt. Luckily, Morgan's arrival distracted the robots—who, peculiarly, did not fire the spikes at the SAFE agents, just ordinary bullets.

The spikes are only meant for the Hulk, Hayes realized. *But why? They would only slow him down for a few minutes. At best, they'd just make him angry—and that's pretty stupid. I mean, the angrier he gets, the stronger he gets, everyone knows that. So why would someone as smart as the Leader do that?*

As he pulled out the last spike, the Hulk let loose with a primal scream that chilled Hayes to the bone. Little evidence of the brilliant scientific mind that Hayes had met at Cal State years ago could be seen. Indeed, he gave a snarl worthy of the old savage Hulk.

"I swear, Sterns, I'll kill you! You hear?! You'll die! *Hulk will smash Big-Head!*"

Again, Hayes was chilled. *He's not supposed to talk like that anymore.*

Then he saw something he didn't expect: the Hulk started to shrink and change color. Muscles seemed to collapse, bones reshaped themselves, skin lightened and paled.

The shouting didn't stop, though. "Hulk will *smash*!"

Within seconds, the unassuming physical presence of Bruce Banner knelt in the center of the room, legs awash in the remains of the Hulk's massive slacks. But the cries of, "Hulk smash!" continued to emanate from his lips.

"My God!" someone said.

Only then did Hayes take stock of the rest of his surroundings, and realize that Morgan and the others had taken care of the robots in fairly short order. Their metallic remains lay on the floor only twenty feet in front of Banner.

"How the hell did *that* happen?" someone else asked, pointing to the skinny, half-naked scientist.

"He got really angry," Hayes said. "Maybe it's a side effect."

"Side effect?" the first agent said.

"Of this new merged personality of his. Maybe it's the price he pays for having access to Banner's intellect while in the Hulk's—"

"*Hulk smash puny humans!*" a small voice cried at the top of its meager lungs. Banner disentangled himself from the Hulk's oversized pants and leapt on Morgan, trying to punch the colonel in the chest, and not making much headway against the kevlar.

Morgan grabbed Banner by the wrists and tossed him at the two agents who had been sticking with Hayes. "You two take care of him. Make sure he doesn't hurt himself. Hayes, check out this equipment. Let's see what we've got here."

"Not much from what I've been able to see, sir," Hayes said, moving to another terminal. He typed a few keys, pressed a few buttons, but nothing happened. "As far as I can tell, everything in this place has been wiped clean." He looked around the room, and something caught his eye. "Hello! This is interesting." He went over to a mechanism with a small podium-like terminal attached to a one-inch-high circular platform. One had to stand on the platform to operate the terminal.

"Geez," one of the agents said, "looks like something outta *Star Trek*."

"You're not that far off," Hayes said. "I'm pretty sure this is a teleporter of some kind."

Morgan asked, "Can you tell who used it last?"

Hayes shook his head. "No. It's been wiped, just like everything else." He put his hand to the side of the terminal. "It's still warm, though. Whoever did use it last used it pretty recently. Probably set it to wipe the software as soon as he left."

"Wonderful," Morgan muttered.

"*Let go of Hulk, or Hulk will smash!*"

Hayes turned to see Banner frantically leaping into the air, his arms held by the two agents. Hayes found it hard to believe that the red face currently snarling, spitting, and shouting was the same face that calmly lectured him on nuclear physics over a decade ago.

Suddenly, R.B. Hayes didn't envy Bruce Banner quite so much.

"Uh, Colonel—" said one of Banner restrainers.

Morgan sighed and turned to the agent next to him. "Johanssen, get the medical kit out of the hovercraft. There's got to be a sedative in there."

"Yessir."

"Hayes, check out the rest of this facility. I seriously doubt that Sterns left anything behind, but let's make sure."

The pudgy agent nodded, but couldn't stop staring at the mass of inarticulate rage that stood before him. The misanthropic savagery of the incredible Hulk trapped inside a ninety-nine-pound weakling. It was the worst of all possible worlds.

Shuddering, Hayes got to work.

Sean Morgan looked up from Nefertiti Jones's report on the fight against the U-Foes when the Hulk walked in, back to his usual seven-foot, green-skinned self. At first, Morgan saw no evidence that this same man had been a raving, diminutive scientist only an hour before.

Then he saw the Hulk's green eyes. Morgan knew that look. He'd seen it twenty years ago in the mirror following the first time he got shot after joining the Army and he truly became aware of his own mortality. He saw it again twenty minutes ago in Joan White's eyes when he told her that her husband wouldn't be coming home.

"You're looking much better than the last time I saw you. What was that, anyhow?"

"Let's just call it an unfortunate side effect and leave it at that, okay, Morgan?" the Hulk snapped.

Morgan shrugged. "Fine. How's Mrs. Banner?"

"The doctor said she had a mild concussion and some contusions. We'll be able to leave in a couple of hours." He gave Morgan a long look. "And when we do, I don't want you following me."

Morgan sighed. He had expected this. "I understand."

The Hulk obviously hadn't expected that response. "You do?"

"You were found once, it could happen again."

Nodding, the Hulk said, "Exactly. It's not that I don't trust *you*. I do. You're one of only a small handful of people I can say that about right now."

Morgan blinked. He knew how hard an admission that had to be for Banner to make, and he gave a small nod in acknowledgement.

"But I don't trust the people you report to, and I can't trust the people who work under you. When Betty and I go, we can't have anyone following us, and no GammaTrac spying on us."

"Funny thing about the GammaTrac," Morgan said. "It's developed a nasty bug. Keeps giving false readings. We'll probably have to scrap it."

The Hulk frowned. "When did this happen?"

"About three seconds ago."

A small smile played on the Hulk's lips.

The intercom on Morgan's desk beeped. "Colonel?" said the voice of Nef Jones.

"Yes?"

"Agent Spilimbergo has asked to speak to you and Dr. Banner, Colonel. She said it was important, but that she'd only speak to you two."

"Maybe she has a message from Sterns," the Hulk said.

Morgan shrugged. "All right, we'll be right down."

The trip to the detention wing of the Helicarrier didn't take long. Lucia Spilimbergo—an athletic, olive-skinned woman with curly dark hair cropped short—sat forlornly in one of the six cells. Upon the arrival of Morgan and the Hulk, she rose and approached the bars.

"At last," she said in a small voice. "I have a message."

Then her eyes glazed over, and she spoke with another, male voice. "Greetings Colonel Morgan. Dr. Banner."

The Hulk snarled. "Sterns."

"Please, Doctor. Samuel Sterns was a lowly manual laborer. I am the Leader. You of all people should appreciate the distinction. In any case, I hope you aren't going to be so foolish as to try to find me. You can rest assured that I will find you soon enough—when my plan comes to fruition."

"And what plan would that be?" the Hulk asked.

"Oh, it's the same plan as ever, Doctor. You should be familiar with it by now. We've certainly danced the dance enough times. But the dance does change with each new transformation you undergo.

I've planted several of my agents within assorted intelligence agencies around the world, and the one I placed in S.H.I.E.L.D. turned up a most fascinating file regarding your new predilection for reverting to your Bruce Banner physical form with the savage Hulk's mental processes when you get too angry."

Morgan tensed. The Leader must have seen this through Spilimbergo's eyes, since he said, "Don't worry, Colonel—that mole has long since been terminated. And unlike you, the hierarchy there never got onto him. I commend you for that, by the way.

"In any event," the Leader's voice continued through Spilimbergo's lips, "I found this new wrinkle fascinating, so I set events into motion using young Ms. Spilimbergo here to test your mettle. SAFE was kind enough to provide a roadmap for you to find my Pennsylvania lair, allowing me to see this 'savage Banner' up close. It was most instructive."

Morgan shook his head. They had swept the limestone mine thoroughly and found no evidence of surveillance devices. Yet the Leader still managed to see everything that happened there.

"Instructive?" the Hulk said. "That's all you can call it?"

"Don't insult either of us by being surprised, Doctor. After all, we are men of science, both of us. One must gather data. And the data I gathered will prove tremendously useful. As a bonus, I was able to finally rid myself of Utrecht and his imbecilic playmates. They were becoming a hindrance, and I can assure you, Colonel Morgan, that I will not be making any silly attempts to break them out, as they say. Good day to you both."

Spilimbergo's eyes returned to normal.

Then she collapsed.

Before Morgan could react, the Hulk ripped the door off the cell and knelt over the young woman's prone form, checking for a pulse.

"She's dead," he announced.

The next morning, the Hulk and his wife stood in the Helicarrier's dock, standing outside one of SAFE's hovercraft. Jones was explaining things to the Banners as Morgan entered.

"It'll come back to the 'carrier as soon as you disembark, and the flight plan will wipe itself as soon as it gets back here."

"Good," Mrs. Banner said.

Morgan approached the trio. "I'm sorry things turned out this way."

"And I'm sorry about your two agents," Mrs. Banner said.

"Did they find a cause of death for Spilimbergo?" the Hulk asked.

Morgan nodded. "A blood vessel in her brain burst. She died instantly."

The Hulk shook his head.

Jones said, "You realize that by cutting yourself off like this, we won't be able to help you. You'll be completely on your own from here on."

The Hulk actually laughed at that. "So, what else is new?"

THE LAST TITAN

Peter David

Illustration by George Pérez

The sky glowed green today at sunset.

It does that often these days. I can sit and watch it for hours, because when it vanishes and darkness falls upon me, it's still embedded in my mind.

My name is Bruce Banner. I am over two hundred years old, I think.

I feel . . . cold.

And I should be dying very soon . . .

. . . I want to. God in heaven, I want to.

But *he* won't let me. He never feels cold . . . or love . . . or anything except anger.

Banner . . . puny Banner . . . still feel him, rattling around in Hulk's head. Was out for a while . . . doing stupid puny human things.

Why won't Banner leave Hulk alone? Why does Banner still stay with Hulk, no matter what? Doesn't Banner know that Hulk hates him . . . more than anyone?

More than Leader. More than Juggernaut. Hulk

hates

Banner.

And Hulk hates little floating thing. Hulk would smash it if Hulk could catch it.

And bugs.

Hulk hates bugs.

But Banner most of all.

They called World War I the Big One. The War to End All Wars. The irony of that was, of course, that they had no idea what was awaiting them. World War II, of course, which ushered in the atomic age.

When Truman dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it was a rather spectacular bluff. The U.S. only had the two bombs—

Fat Man and Little Boy. It would have taken months to produce more, months during which—for all we know—the Japanese could have mounted a counteroffensive.

But instead the Japanese saw the terrible might at the disposal of their opponents and surrendered. They knew, I suspect, the horrible thing that had been unleashed, and hoped that it would never again see the light of day. One might argue that their surrender was honorable.

There is no honor left in the world.

There is no world.

I haven't travelled the entire world, you understand. Just my part of it. Enough to satisfy me. I've travelled the length and breadth of the United States. Explored the entire North American continent, up into Canada, down into Mexico and South America.

I've seen the leveled mountains, the destroyed monuments. The rivers of blood long dried, the ashes scattered away to the winds. The Rain Forest wilted and dying, the . . .

They're coming.

I can always tell. The ground trembles beneath their feet as they approach, moving in a mass like a black, undulating carpet.

And he's not coming.

And I want to die.

But I fight to live out of old habit.

My hair is white and brittle, my skin blistered and chapped, most of my teeth are gone. I tremble a good deal these days. Might be Parkinson's. Might just be nerves. I still have a pronounced limp from the leg break that never healed properly. There are still traces of radiation in the air, but never bothers me particularly. My molecular structure, even in its human form, is just a sponge for it now. Has been for years. My poor body may be heir to the other frailties of humanity, but from rads, at least, I remain immune.

I see myself reflected in the lens of the Vidbot, or watch the playbacks later, and try to see something of the man I was in that face.

And he's gone. That man is long gone.

But *he* remains.

The two of us—the only ones left alive.

Out of spite, perhaps, he does not emerge immediately. Instead he hides somewhere within me, enjoying my discomfiture, revelling in my weakness. Perhaps he wants to hear me beg. Perhaps he sees me, out of old habit, fighting to save a life that I no longer desire to keep, and it amuses him, for amusement is hard to turn up these days.

The land is open and flat ahead of me, as it is in most places. The ground is nearly as brittle as I am, flat and dry and inhospitable to most any sort of life. I would have died long ago of starvation, were it not for *his* ability to ingest virtually anything and turn it into pure energy. Not since the shark has there been such a perfect engine of survival.

I am the weak piston in that engine.

Nonetheless, I start to run. I don't glance back, because I know the black wave is coming. The Vidbot floats behind me, leisurely, taking it all in. If I survive, then I'll be interested to watch the outcome. If not, well . . .

. . . so much the better.

Then I hear something, which is unusual since typically there's only the trembling of the ground beneath me.

It's a sound, like a rustling of plastic wings clicking against hollow bodies.

Now I do glance back, and I see them coming, but they're not just approaching. They're flying. The bastards are flying.

In the past they've come upon him while he was asleep. He never lets me out to sleep; he wouldn't dare. He couldn't keep an eye on me that way. When he's awake; only when he's awake. And when they do attack him while he's asleep, the battle is short and brutal and all too often the same.

But this time, this time they're converging on me, and it's not as if I can just leap away.

The black mass swarms towards me. I'm running faster and faster across the scorched plain, my skinny arms pumping, my foot coverings flapping about on my feet. Then I feel something go in my calf, a muscle spasm, but at my age that's all it takes.

I go down hard, and I can practically hear the brittle snapping of the bones. I roll on the ground, but I don't feel the agony which must

be there. The pain won't penetrate for some time, providing I'm alive long enough to feel it. Which I likely won't.

Get up! My mind screams, and it's not my voice doing so, but *his.* The ground is rumbling faster and faster beneath me, and I try to drag myself forward on my aged arms.

The bugs. They're coming.

They always said that the only thing which would likely be around after it all came to an end would be the cockroaches. From an evolutionary standpoint, they were the ideal survivors.

Well, they've continued to evolve. And they haven't gotten more pleasant.

My breath is ragged in my chest, and I can hear them. I don't know whether it's in my imagination or whether they're really making some sort of swarming noise, like locusts and chittering, and, oh God, they've almost caught up with me, they're coming, and . . .

. . . and I can feel the change. He's coming, and I'm going to live.

Bugs everywhere . . . bugs attacking Hulk . . . want to hurt Hulk. People all gone and still Hulk is not left alone!

Hulk tries to leap . . . tries to escape . . . but the bugs fly now. Bugs all over Hulk, driving Hulk down. Hulk pushes them off, crushes them. Hulk's fingers are thick with crushed bugs. But Hulk crushes ten and a hundred more come.

They rip at Hulk's skin. Hulk is strongest one there is . . . but millions . . . millions of bugs . . . everywhere . . .

They would have killed puny Banner . . . they're trying to kill Hulk. . . .

Nothing can stop Hulk.

Nothing can hurt Hulk.

But . . . they are hurting Hulk . . . everywhere . . . arms, legs, crawling all over. . . .

Why won't they leave Hulk alone?

WHY WON'T THEY LEAVE HULK ALONE!!!

I watch the playback on the Vidbot and still can't quite believe it. God knows I've seen it before . . . but it still staggers credibility.

I remember centuries ago, when that supertanker spilled oil all over the coast of Alaska. And there were pictures of . . . of animals . . . poor, helpless animals, covered with oil. I felt so sorry for the unfortunate beasts.

That's what the Hulk looks like in the playback, except that the oil slick is alive. The bugs are all over him, pulling at him, picking at him, devouring him. I watch him roar and howl and shout things in almost inarticulate fury, watch as he's consumed by them. Given any single foe, or even any group of foes, and the Hulk was always able to triumph. But trying to beat back a bug attack is like trying to fight the surf. It crashes over you, heedless of your best efforts. For all the good it does you to battle it, you might as well not try at all.

Credit the Hulk. He does try.

But he disappears beneath them anyway.

He fights, he squirms, he howls. And eventually, the bugs grow tired, or sated, or bored. Whatever. Just as they always do. They move off, move past him, and I see him lying there, barely recognizable as anything remotely humanoid. They've stripped away his skin, eaten away at his musculature, gotten partway into his circulatory system. As near as I can tell, one of his kidneys has been eaten away, and roughly a yard or so of his lower intestine. Both eyes are gone, and his tongue as well . . . I can tell because he's not saying any words at this point, merely grunting unintelligibly.

This looks like a bad one. It's going to take him a while to recover.

I sit and watch the entire process because, really, I have nothing else to do. I check the time elapse. I still have enough scientific curiosity to monitor it.

Eighteen minutes.

Eighteen minutes of watching the skin slowly reknit itself, grow back upon the skeleton. His tongue grows back in within two minutes; I know because it's at that point that he begins snarling profanities regarding his life in general and me in particular.

The eyes grow back in, and just before the lining of his belly is restored I see the intestine reinsert itself into place. Eighteen minutes until everything is back the way it was before and the Hulk stands, healed. Back as he was before.

He glances upward and sees the Vidbot. He snarls something that I can't quite make out and then he leaps for it, just as he has done so many times in the past. But the device is elegant in its simplicity, capable of detecting any motion coming its way and keeping a distance of ten feet between itself and harm. Solar powered, it would take nothing less than the destruction of the entire world to put an end to the Vidbot.

And for all I know, even the globe's destruction might not be enough to finish the Hulk.

Hulk hates stupid floating globe. Hulk hates puny Banner. Hulk hates stupid bugs, and Hulk hates how much it hurts when Hulk's body regrows.

Hulk hates world.

But . . . at least Hulk's enemies are gone. Stupid men. Stupid women. Always trying to hurt Hulk. And stupid boy, Rick, is gone. And Betty. Betty is gone. Her father, the shouting man, is gone. All gone. All all gone.

And Hulk is still here.

Hulk had last laugh. And Hulk will keep laughing. Because Hulk is strongest one there is.

Found a cliff today.

Not much. A small precipice. Should have been enough.

I don't know what possessed me to try and throw myself off it. It was a waste of time. I should have known. I should have known he'd stop it.

I tried to do it without warning him. Not think about it, just do it. Just impulsively hurl myself off the cliff. Should have done the job.

Didn't.

He instigated the change before I was halfway down. Bruce Banner threw himself into the void, but it was the Hulk who landed. He dusted himself off and didn't even seem to be aware that anything was amiss.

God, I hate him.

Puny Banner tried to kill himself. Stupid Banner. He thinks he

can kill Hulk. He thinks he can get away. Hulk will never let him go. Hulk will go on forever.

Strongest one there is.

I saw a woman today.

She was naked, clothed in flowing brown hair. She stood at the far end of a plateau, and I stumbled towards her. Every step I took towards her, her beauty seemed to grow and blossom and become more pure, more luscious, like an overripe fruit begging to be devoured. Pure, green grass was blooming beneath her feet, and the horizon was no longer green, but becoming instead the purest blue. My decrepit state, my appearance, none of it seemed to bother her. She wanted me. She needed me. And as I got closer and closer, I felt younger, more buoyant, more alive, and then I was upon her. Heat built within me and she sighed and moaned and said softly into my ear, We will repopulate the world. We will be Adam and Eve. No . . . we'll be gods. Gods.

And then my daydream slipped away. The woman, gone, the green grass, gone, the blue sky all vanishing into the twilight mist of unreality . . .

. . . but the heat is still here. I feel it. The heat . . . in my chest . . .

. . . dull, constricting, like a vise.

Like fire.

Fire.

Gods . . .

. . . of course. Of course . . . I understand now . . . I've been blind . . . how could I have been so blind . . . ?

Banner . . . what is puny Banner doing? Banner is trying to hurt Hulk. Something is going on with Banner . . . Hulk won't let him hurt Hulk anymore. . . .

Never should have . . . kept puny Banner around . . . don't know why . . . why Hulk did . . . stupid . . . Hulk is strongest, but not smartest . . . Hulk never needed to be smart . . . smart is Puny Banner, weak Banner . . . don't want to be smart like Banner . . . don't want to be anything like Banner. . . .

Why did Hulk let him stay?
Hulk must crush him . . . like bug . . . must. . . .

The pain has been constant for the last two days, and now it's growing. Perhaps the Hulk's body can go on forever . . . but this one can't.

The grip of fire across my chest, and I've realized it . . . it all makes sense now. . . .

At the dawn of time . . . Prometheus, the legendary titan, brought fire to humanity. And the gods were so angry at him that they chained him to a barren place and left him there for the carrion eaters to devour. And he would writhe in agony as they ate his innards . . .

Banner . . . thinking too much . . . puny Banner . . . must stop him. . . .

. . . and they would always grow back. His body would heal itself, good as new, so that the process could begin all over again.

And the Hulk . . . the Hulk was . . . is . . . the living symbol of the atomic age. The atomic-age Frankenstein, they called him. The atomic-age Jekyll and Hyde. The gamma-spawned monster. The atomic age, which brought fire and a terrible, terrible knowledge to humankind. A knowledge for which the final, terrible price was . . . oblivion.

When the Hulk first strode the earth . . . God in heaven . . . there were giants in those days. Hercules, and Giant-Man, and Captain America, and the Fantastic Four, and Spider-Man, and all of them, on and on. More than mortal . . . they were, each in their way, titans. Some of them, like the X-Men, even owed their existence on a genetic level to radiation.

Shut up, Banner. Stop your puny talking. Stop making chest hurt. What is . . . what is Banner's plan? Yes . . . Banner is trying to hurt Hulk, destroy Hulk, one final time. But Hulk will stop him.

But the Hulk was spawned in the heart of a nuclear blast. That made him first. First among the Titans. First . . . and last. For all the others are gone now. Gone because of the ghastly knowledge that came from the creation of the atomic bomb.

Someone has to pay for that knowledge. Someone has to continue

to be punished, because there are some crimes that are simply so awful, so beyond forgiveness, that punishment must continue to be exacted. That's what hell is for, after all.

Hell on earth.

The Hulk has been given the mantel of Prometheus. The living symbol of nuclear fire is to be devoured, over and over again, but always able to rise up and be consumed once more.

The last Titan.

And my body is failing. And if he lets me go . . . it'll be over . . . the suffering will finally be over . . . my body can fail, but his can't, and if. . . .

Banner . . . trying to trick Hulk . . . will change. . . .

I'm on . . . the brink, I believe . . . yes . . . it's . . . it's so perfect . . . I can see them across the veil . . . the fire in my chest is building, building, like a lover . . . can't move . . . they're there . . . Betty, Rick, Marlo . . . my God, Jarella, you're there . . . all of you . . . Hulk . . . let it go. . . .

Hulk will come out now . . . Hulk will stop it. . . .

Hulk . . . don't . . . please . . . I'm almost there . . . you can come with me . . . it will be wonderful . . . all your friends will be there, and there will be peace . . . please. . . .

Hulk doesn't want friends.

Hulk . . . God in heaven, listen to me. . . .

Hulk doesn't want friends, because friends will hurt him. Everyone hurts him. Everyone hurts Hulk.

Not in this place . . . it's . . . chest . . . can't think . . . Hulk . . . don't do it . . . leave me alone . . . please. . . .

Hulk won't let it happen! Hulk doesn't want friends! Hulk doesn't want to be with anybody, because Hulk JUST WANTS TO BE *LEFT ALONE*!!!

Banner . . . is gone now. . . .

Banner tried to . . . make Hulk die. But Hulk was too smart. Hulk was too strong. Hulk will never let Banner come back, because if Hulk ever does, then Hulk would die. And Hulk does not ever want to die.

Not ever.

Because . . . then . . . then everyone who kept trying to kill Hulk . . . will win. And Hulk can't ever let them win. Even though they are gone . . . Hulk must still win. Hulk must never lose.

Hulk will even find way to beat bugs some day.

And Hulk . . . Hulk doesn't miss Banner at all. Hulk is . . . Hulk is happy to be alone. Yes. Hulk is. Hulk is . . . happy. Hulk never needed Banner. Never needed any of them. Because if Hulk needed someone . . . then Hulk would be weak. And Hulk must . . . must never be weak. Never.

Because Hulk is . . .

Hulk is strongest one there is . . .

. . . Hulk is . . .

Hulk is . . . *only* one . . . there is. . . .

Only one . . . there . . . is . . .

Hulk feels . . .

. . . cold.

CHRONOLOGY TO THE MARVEL NOVELS AND ANTHOLOGIES

What follows is a guide to the order in which the Marvel novels and short stories published by Byron Preiss Multimedia Company and Berkley Boulevard Books take place in relation to each other. Please note that this is not a hard and fast chronology, but a guideline that is subject to change at authorial or editorial whim. This list covers all the novels and anthologies published from October 1994–December 1998.

The short stories are each given an abbreviation to indicate which anthology the story appeared in. USM=*The Ultimate Spider-Man*, USS=*The Ultimate Silver Surfer*, USV=*The Ultimate Super-Villains*, UXM=*The Ultimate X-Men*, UTS=*Untold Tales of Spider-Man*, and UH=*The Ultimate Hulk*.

If you have any questions or comments regarding this chronology, please write us.

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—Keith R.A. DeCandido, Editor

X-Men & Spider-Man: Time's Arrow Book 1: **The Past [portions]**
by Tom DeFalco & Jason Henderson

Parts of this novel take place in prehistoric times, the sixth century, 1867, and 1944.

"The Silver Surfer" [flashback]
by Tom DeFalco & Stan Lee [USS]

The Silver Surfer's origin. The early parts of this flashback start several decades, possibly several centuries, ago, and continue to a point just prior to "To See Heaven in a Wild Flower."

"In the Line of Banner"
by Danny Fingeroth [UH]

This takes place approximately nine months before the birth of Robert Bruce Banner.

X-men: Codename Wolverine ["then" portions]
by Christopher Golden
The "then" portions of this novel take place while Team X was still in operation, while the Black Widow was still a Soviet spy, and while Banshee was still with Interpol.

"Spider-Man"
by Stan Lee & Peter David [USM]
A retelling of Spider-Man's origin.

"Transformations"
by Will Murray [UH]
"Side by Side with the Astonishing Ant-Man!"
by Will Murray [UTS]
"Assault on Avengers Mansion"
by Richard C. White & Steven A. Roman [UH]
"Suits"
by Tom De Haven & Dean Wesley Smith [USM]
"After the First Death . . ."
by Tom DeFalco [UTS]
"Celebrity"
by Christopher Golden & José R. Nieto [UTS]
"Pitfall"
by Pierce Askegren [UH]
"Better Looting Through Modern Chemistry"
by John Garcia & Pierce Askegren [UTS]
These stories take place very early in the careers of Spider-Man and the Hulk.

"To the Victor"
by Richard Lee Byers [USV]
Most of this story takes place in an alternate timeline, but the jumping-off point is here.

"To See Heaven in a Wild Flower"
by Ann Tonsor Zeddies [USS]
"Point of View"
by Len Wein [USS]
These stories take place shortly after the end of the flashback portion of "The Silver Surfer."

"Identity Crisis"
by Michael Jan Friedman [UTS]
"The Liar"
by Ann Nocenti [UTS]
"The Doctor's Dilemma"
by Danny Fingeroth [UTS]
"Moving Day"
by John S. Drew [UTS]
"Out of the Darkness"
by Glenn Greenberg [UH]
"Deadly Force"
by Richard Lee Byers [UTS]
"Truck Stop"
by Jo Duffy [UH]
"Hiding"
by Christopher Golden & Nancy Holder [UH]

"Improper Procedure"
by Keith R.A. DeCandido [USS]
"Poison in the Soul"
by Glenn Greenberg [UTS]
"Here There Be Dragons"
by Sholly Fisch [UH]
"The Ballad of Fancy Dan"
by Ken Grobe & Steven A. Roman [UTS]
"Do You Dream in Silver?"
by James Dawson [USS]
"A Quiet, Normal Life"
by Thomas Deja [UH]
"Livewires"
by Steve Lyons [UTS]
"Arms and the Man"
by Keith R.A. DeCandido [UTS]
"Incident on a Skyscraper"
by Dave Smeds [USS]
"A Green Snake in Paradise"
by Steve Lyons [UH]

These all take place at various and sundry points in the careers of Spider-Man, the Silver Surfer, and the Hulk: after their origins, but before Spider-Man got married, the Silver Surfer ended his exile on Earth, and the reemergence of the gray Hulk.

"Cool"
by Lawrence Watt-Evans [USM]
"Blindspot"
by Ann Nocenti [USM]
"Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Courier"
by Robert L. Washington III [USM]
"Thunder on the Mountain"
by Richard Lee Byers [USM]
"The Stalking of John Doe"
by Adam-Troy Castro [UTS]
"On the Beach"
by John J. Ordover [USS]

These all take place just prior to Peter Parker's marriage to Mary Jane Watson and the Silver Surfer's release from imprisonment on Earth.

Daredevil: Predator's Smile
by Christopher Golden
"Disturb Not Her Dream"
by Steve Rasnic Tem [USS]
"My Enemy, My Savior"
by Eric Fein [UTS]
"Kraven the Hunter Is Dead, Alas"
by Craig Shaw Gardner [USM]
"The Broken Land"
by Pierce Askegren [USS]
"Radically Both"
by Christopher Golden [USM]

"Godhood's End"
by Sharman DiVono [USS]
"Scoop!"
by David Michelinie [USM]
"The Beast with Nine Bands"
by James A. Wolf [UH]
"Sambatyon"
by David M. Honigsberg [USS]
"Cold Blood"
by Greg Cox [USM]
"The Tarnished Soul"
by Katherine Lawrence [USS]
"Leveling Las Vegas"
by Stan Timmons [UH]
"If Wishes Were Horses"
by Tony Isabella & Bob Ingersoll [USV]
"The Silver Surfer" [framing sequence]
by Tom DeFalco & Stan Lee [USS]
"The Samson Journals"
by Ken Grobe [UH]
These all take place after Peter Parker's marriage to Mary Jane Watson, after the Silver Surfer attained freedom from imprisonment on Earth, and before the Hulk's personalities were merged.

"The Deviant Ones"
by Glenn Greenberg [USV]
"An Evening in the Bronx with Venom"
by John Gregory Betancourt & Keith R.A. DeCandido [USM]
These two stories take place one after the other, and a few months prior to The Venom Factor.

The Incredible Hulk: What Savage Beast
by Peter David
This novel takes place over a one-year period, starting here and ending just prior to Rampage.

"On the Air"
by Glenn Hauman [UXM]
"Connect the Dots"
by Adam-Troy Castro [USV]
"Summer Breeze"
by Jenn Saint-John & Tammy Lynne Dunn [UXM]
"Out of Place"
by Dave Smeds [UXM]
These stories all take place prior to the Mutant Empire *trilogy.*

X-Men: Mutant Empire Book 1: **Siege**
by Christopher Golden
X-Men: Mutant Empire Book 2: **Sanctuary**
by Christopher Golden
X-Men: Mutant Empire Book 3: **Salvation**
by Christopher Golden
These three novels take place within a three-day period.

Fantastic Four: To Free Atlantis
by Nancy A. Collins
"The Love of Death or the Death of Love"
by Craig Shaw Gardner [USS]
"Firetrap"
by Michael Jan Friedman [USV]
"What's Yer Poison?"
by Christopher Golden & José R. Nieto [USS]
"Sins of the Flesh"
by Steve Lyons [USV]
"Doom^2"
by Joey Cavalieri [USV]
"Child's Play"
by Robert L. Washington III [USV]
"A Game of the Apocalypse"
by Dan Persons [USS]
"All Creatures Great and Skrull"
by Greg Cox [USV]
"Ripples"
by José R. Nieto [USV]
"Who Do You Want Me to Be?"
by Ann Nocenti [USV]
"One for the Road"
by James Dawson [USV]
These are more or less simultaneous, with "Doom^2" taking place after To Free Atlantis, *"Child's Play" taking place shortly after "What's Yer Poison?" and "A Game of the Apocalypse" taking place shortly after "The Love of Death or the Death of Love."*

"Five Minutes"
by Peter David [USM]
This takes place on Peter Parker and Mary Jane Watson-Parker's first anniversary.

Spider-Man: The Venom Factor
by Diane Duane
Spider-Man: The Lizard Sanction
by Diane Duane
Spider-Man: The Octopus Agenda
by Diane Duane
These three novels take place within a six-week period.

"The Night I Almost Saved Silver Sable"
by Tom DeFalco [USV]
"Traps"
by Ken Grobe [USV]
These stories take place one right after the other.

Iron Man: The Armor Trap
by Greg Cox
Iron Man: Operation A.I.M.
by Greg Cox
"Private Exhibition"
by Pierce Askegren [USV]

Fantastic Four: Redemption of the Silver Surfer
by Michael Jan Friedman
Spider-Man & The Incredible Hulk: Rampage (Doom's Day Book 1)
by Danny Fingeroth & Eric Fein
Spider-Man & Iron Man: Sabotage (Doom's Day Book 2)
by Pierce Askegren & Danny Fingeroth
Spider-Man & Fantastic Four: Wreckage (Doom's Day Book 3)
by Eric Fein & Pierce Askegren

Operation A.I.M. *takes place about two weeks after* The Armor Trap. *The "Doom's Day" trilogy takes place within a three-month period. The events of* Operation A.I.M., *"Private Exhibition,"* Redemption of the Silver Surfer, *and* Rampage *happen more or less simultaneously.* Wreckage *is only a few months after* The Octopus Agenda.

"It's a Wonderful Life"
by eluki bes shahar [UXM]
"Gift of the Silver Fox"
by Ashley McConnell [UXM]
"Stillborn in the Mist"
by Dean Wesley Smith [UXM]
"Order from Chaos"
by Evan Skolnick [UXM]

These stories take place simultaneously.

"X-Presso"
by Ken Grobe [UXM]
"Life Is But a Dream"
by Stan Timmons [UXM]
"Four Angry Mutants"
by Andy Lane & Rebecca Levene [UXM]
"Hostages"
by J. Steven York [UXM]

These stories take place one right after the other.

Spider-Man: Carnage in New York
by David Michelinie & Dean Wesley Smith
Spider-Man: Goblin's Revenge
by Dean Wesley Smith

These novels take place one right after the other.

X-Men: Smoke and Mirrors
by eluki bes shahar

This novel takes place three-and-a-half months after "It's a Wonderful Life."

Generation X
by Scott Lobdell & Elliot S! Maggin
X-Men: The Jewels of Cyttorak
by Dean Wesley Smith
X-Men: Empire's End
by Diane Duane
X-Men: Law of the Jungle
by Dave Smeds

X-Men: Prisoner X
by Ann Nocenti
These novels take place one right after the other.

The Incredible Hulk: Abominations
by Jason Henderson
Fantastic Four: Countdown to Chaos
by Pierce Askegren
"Playing It SAFE"
by Keith R.A. DeCandido [UH]
These take place one right after the other, with Abominations *taking place a couple of weeks after* Wreckage.

"Mayhem Party"
by Robert Sheckley [USV]
This story takes place after Goblin's Revenge.

X-Men & Spider-Man: Time's Arrow Book 1: **The Past**
by Tom DeFalco & Jason Henderson
X-Men & Spider-Man: Time's Arrow Book 2: **The Present**
by Tom DeFalco & Adam-Troy Castro
X-Men & Spider-Man: Time's Arrow Book 3: **The Future**
by Tom DeFalco & eluki bes shahar
These novels take place within a twenty-four-hour period in the present, though it also involves travelling to various points in the past, to an alternate present, and to five different alternate futures.

Spider-Man: Valley of the Lizard
by John Vornholt
Spider-Man: Venom's Wrath
by Keith R.A. DeCandido & José R. Nieto
Spider-Man: Wanted Dead or Alive
by Craig Shaw Gardner
"Sidekick"
by Dennis Brabham [UH]
Captain America: Liberty's Torch
by Tony Isabella & Bob Ingersoll
These take place one right after the other, with Venom's Wrath *taking place a month after* Valley of the Lizard, *and* Wanted Dead or Alive *several months after* Venom's Wrath.

Generation X: Crossroads
by J. Steven York
X-Men: Codename Wolverine ["now" portions]
by Christopher Golden
These novels take place one right after the other, with Codename Wolverine *taking place less than a week after* Crossroads.

X-Men & Spider-Man: Time's Arrow Book 3: **The Future [portions]**
by Tom DeFalco & eluki bes shahar
Parts of this novel take place in five different alternate futures in 2020, 2035, 2099, 3000, and the fortieth century.

"The Last Titan"
by Peter David [UH]
This takes place in a possible future.

SCIENCE FICTION

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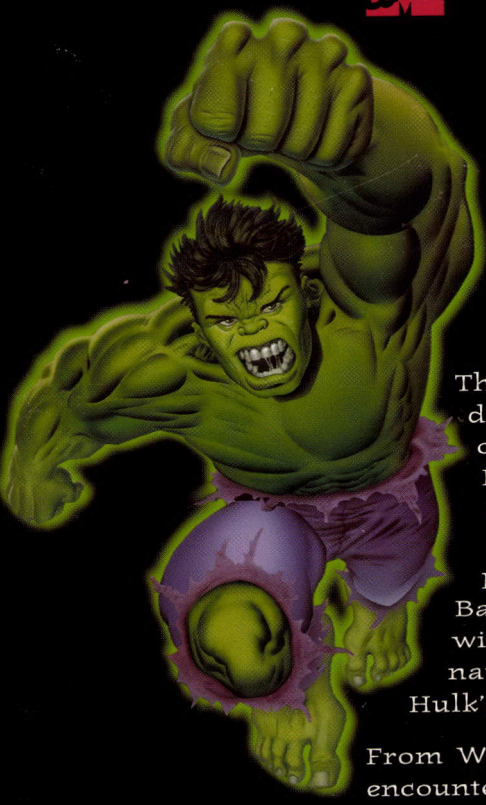

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